

Son of God

The Daily Gospel Year C - 2



Fr. Edward J. Tyler

Son of God:
The Daily Gospel C-2

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Son of God

The Daily Gospel C-2

(According to the Novus Ordo)

(Sundays year C, Weekdays year 2, Feast days)

Thoughts on the Daily Gospel

by

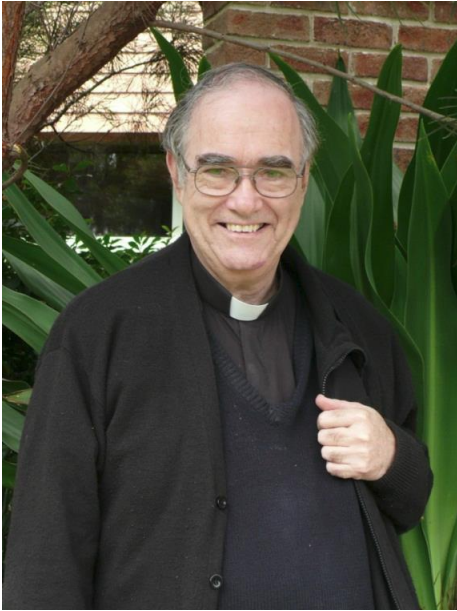
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Preface

The following work — written especially for the lay reader — is meant as an aid to reflection on the



Gospel passage of each day of the liturgical year C-2 (Sundays: Cycle C, Weekdays: Cycle 2). At times the comment is exegetical, at times homiletic, at times more wide-ranging. It is hoped that these thoughts on the

daily Gospel may assist in appreciating the living Person of Jesus Christ, Son of God and our brother, risen from the dead and Head of the Church which is his creation. He is the Redeemer of man.

Father Edward Tyler

St Paul's Letter to the Colossians 1:9-22

9 αἰτούμενοι ἵνα πληρωθῇτε τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν
τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ καὶ
συνέσει πνευματικῇ,

*We continually ask God to fill you with the
knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and
understanding that the Spirit gives*

10 περιπατῆσαι ἀξίως τοῦ κυρίου εἰς πᾶσαν
ἀρεσκείαν, ἐν παντὶ ἔργῳ ἀγαθῷ
καρποφοροῦντες καὶ αὐξανόμενοι τῇ ἐπιγνώσει
τοῦ θεοῦ,

*so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and
please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good
work, growing in the knowledge of God*

17 ἐν πάσῃ δυνάμει δυναμούμενοι κατὰ τὸ
κράτος τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ εἰς πᾶσαν ὑπομονὴν
καὶ μακροθυμίαν, μετὰ χαρᾶς

*being strengthened with all power according to his
glorious might so that you may have great
endurance and patience*

12 εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ πατρὶ τῷ ἱκανώσαντι
ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν μερίδα τοῦ κλήρου τῶν ἁγίων ἐν
τῷ φωτί:

*and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has
qualified you[b] to share in the inheritance of his
holy people in the kingdom of light*

13 ὃς ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ
σκότους καὶ μετέστησεν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ
υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ,

*For he has rescued us from the dominion of
darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the
Son he loves*

**14 ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν, τὴν ἄφεσιν
τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν:**

*in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of
sins*

**15 ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,**

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn
over all creation*

**16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς
καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὀρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, εἴτε θρόνοι
εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι: τὰ πάντα δι'
αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται,**

*For in him all things were created: things in heaven
and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones*

*or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have
been created through him and for him*

**17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν
αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν·**

*He is before all things, and in him all things hold
together*

**18 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος, τῆς
ἐκκλησίας: ὃς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν
νεκρῶν, ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,**

*And he is the head of the body, the church; he is
the beginning and the firstborn from among the
dead, so that in everything he might have the
supremacy*

**19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα
κατοικῆσαι**

*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in
him,*

20 καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι' αὐτοῦ] εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς·

and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross

21 Καὶ ὑμᾶς ποτε ὄντας ἀπηλλοτριωμένους καὶ ἐχθροὺς τῇ διανοίᾳ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς πονηροῖς,
Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour

22 νυνὶ δὲ ἀποκατήλλαξεν ἐν τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦ θανάτου, παραστήσαι ὑμᾶς ἁγίους καὶ ἀμώμους καὶ ἀνεγκλήτους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ
But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation

Son of God

The Daily Gospel C-2



Acknowledgements

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Holy Spirit, the Paraclete

Attributed to Rhabanus Maurus, circa 800 AD

Come, Holy Ghost, Creator, come
From Thy bright heavenly throne;
Come, take possession of our souls,
And make them all Thine own.

Thou who art called the Paraclete,
Best gift of God above,
The living spring, the living fire,
Sweet unction and true love.

Thou who art sevenfold in Thy grace,
Finger of God's right hand;
His promise, teaching little ones
To speak and understand.

O guide our minds with Thy blest light,
With love our hearts inflame;
And with Thy strength, which ne'er decays,
Confirm our mortal frame.

Far from us drive our deadly foe;
True peace unto us bring;
And through all perils lead us safe
Beneath Thy sacred wing.

Through Thee may we the Father know,
Through Thee the eternal Son,
And Thee the Spirit of them both,
Thrice-blessèd Three in One.

All glory to the Father be,
With His co-equal Son:
The same to Thee, great Paraclete,
While endless ages run.

Introduction

The Sunday Gospel passages of the Lectionary follow a three-year cycle (A, B, C), in the third year (C) of which the Gospel of St Luke is generally read. This semi-continuous reading of Luke during the Sundays of Ordinary Time (Year C) is interrupted by the reading of passages from the other Gospels (such as John) during the special liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmastide, Lent and Easter. Occasionally the Gospel of John is read also during the Sundays of Ordinary Time Year C.

The weekday Gospel passages are so arranged that portions of all four Gospels are read each year. Mark is read first (First to Ninth Week), then Matthew (Tenth to Twenty-first Week), then Luke (Twenty-second to Thirty-fourth Week). Mark 1-12 are read in their entirety, with the exception only of the two passages of Mark 6 that are read on weekdays in other seasons. From Matthew and Luke the readings comprise all the matters not contained in Mark. Christ's eschatological discourse as contained in Luke is read at the end of the liturgical year. This continuous reading is often interrupted by the Gospels of solemnities and feast days, and of course during the special liturgical seasons. For instance, the Gospel of St John is read throughout Easter, and is used during the special liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmastide and Lent where appropriate.

The first reading and psalm of weekdays are arranged in a two-year cycle (1 and 2). In this book the first readings and psalms for Year 2 are cited in the Scripture references listed before the Gospel passage. The thoughts on the Gospels in this book are for Sundays Year C, and for the weekdays and feast days throughout the year.

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Season of Advent

First Sunday of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24): 1-3 To you, I lift up my soul, O my God. In you, I have trusted; let me not be put to shame. Nor let my enemies exult over me; and let none who hope in you be put to shame.

Collect Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14;
 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2; Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see

the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man. (Luke 21:25-28.34-36)

Temptation to Sin There is a special aura about childhood. The child is the object of the love and joy of the parents, and it is not hard to see why our Lord held up the child for our imitation. We must become like little children, he said. Of course, our Lord was referring to certain aspects of childhood – such as the child's docility and dependence on the guidance of his parents. As the child advances in age, he is thus prepared for the challenges of life. There are great tests ahead of him. He must choose a suitable career, one which hopefully is his

calling. Then he must make his way in it with some success. Marriage will probably be his vocation, unless he has a more distinct calling. As he is growing, the parents and those involved in his upbringing hope that what they are providing will lay the foundations for success. In the event, life could bring enormous challenges. He may fall victim to some great tragedy, be it sickness, bereavement, loss of property or work, injustice, loss of reputation, breakdown of marriage, failure in this or that undertaking. These are great unknowns, and the parents must do what they can to prepare their child for life as it may come. Still, they are unknowns. However, there is a future challenge which is absolutely predictable and it will come constantly. It comes to everyone, and it comes daily. It is the most serious of all challenges and everything ultimately hangs in the balance of its outcome. It is the challenge *par excellence* which every person must be trained for. I am referring to the challenge presented by the temptation to sin. Every person will be tempted to sin and the eternal future of each person hangs on the upshot. Sadly, especially in a modern secular culture, the temptation to sin is not recognized as objective and important. “Sin” is

a trivial and private persuasion which is unmentionable in any public sense. Consider what would be the response were "temptation to sin" to be mentioned on a television panel discussing the most serious challenges facing modern society and culture. There would be an awkward and profound silence, broken perhaps by a joke.

The greatest challenge facing each, be he high or low, is the temptation to sin. This is the challenge of life in a micro sense, and it is the challenge in a macro sense. That is to say, it is the principal challenge facing the most ordinary and unrecognized person and it is the challenge facing the nations. Secularism has so pervaded the world that it is almost inconceivable that the word "sin" be mentioned in public - let alone world - discourse. But just as an individual can sin and sin grievously, so can a government, a people, and the world at large. Sin once appeared even among the angels, and the angelic world broke up as a result. That is to say, a portion of the angelic world was expelled and a new state of life began: Hell, the everlasting death. The temptation to sin was the greatest challenge facing the angels

themselves, and it was the greatest challenge facing man at the beginning. Man failed the challenge, because he gave into its temptation. It has always been the greatest challenge facing man, and it is a daily one. In our Gospel passage today (Luke 21:25-28.34-36), our Lord describes in plain yet vivid terms the falling away of the world before the coming of Christ to judge. The ultimate event in the life of each individual and in the life of the nations will be the judgment of Christ. He will come to judge at the end - at the end of each life and at the end of history. In view of this, Christ says to us: Be careful, be always on the watch! Do not give in to temptation. Do not sin. If you sin, repent of it. "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21: 34-36). In the Lord's Prayer we ask God to "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." We ask that he not leave us alone and in

the power of temptation, but that he give us vigilance, support and perseverance.

As we think of our Lord's words telling us to be careful and to be always on the watch, let us renew our resolve to resist temptation to sin. We must ask the Holy Spirit to help us to discern between trials that bring growth, and temptations to sin that lead to death. Let us ask for the grace to discern between being merely tempted on the one hand, and not consenting to temptation on the other. Let us resolve to understand clearly that the greatest challenge of every day, and the greatest challenge facing all mankind, is that of resisting the temptation to sin. The greatest achievement is that of resisting sin, and the greatest failure is succumbing to temptation. If we do succumb, we must turn to the mercy of God, repent, and resume the grand struggle for him.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2846-2854 (Lead us not to temptation)

A Second Reflection:

Advent – A Time Of Waiting The time of Advent is meant to be a renewed awaiting of the coming of Jesus. This should characterize our whole lives, for that is precisely what life is all about: actively preparing for the coming of the Lord. Our religion is based on what God has revealed, and central to what he revealed was the promise that the Redeemer would come. Those who genuinely accept this revelation are to await his coming and prepare themselves for it. Some eighteen hundred years before Christ, this sense of waiting began when God promised Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. A great blessing began to be expected. It was later revealed that this blessing would come from the tribe of Judah, and would involve the coming of a great king, a Messiah. For many centuries, it was known that he was coming. In fact, word got abroad and was heard about beyond the chosen people. But very many of the chosen people who had the benefit of this foreknowledge did not really prepare themselves for it, for there was repeated religious infidelity throughout the history of God's people. When he did come, and with the special benefit to all of a great prophet to announce it and point to him as the

promised One now arrived, many of his own did not accept him. In the prologue of his Gospel, St John writes that the Word came unto his own and his own did not accept him. This was because they had not awaited his coming in that active sense of preparing themselves so as to be ready to receive him – as the Baptist asked. That is the lesson we ought think of today as we prepare for Christ's next coming. He has come, and He is now with us constantly in the life of the Church. But he is to come again, and when he comes it will be to judge us.

When we hear it said that our lives are to be spent awaiting the coming of Christ, we ought not think of this as a passive waiting. A person waiting for a job vacancy does not just sit at home doing nothing except looking at the employment section each Saturday. No, he uses his time carefully. He gets advice on how to prepare a very impressive curriculum vitae and job application. He lines up good and reliable referees. He gets some training on how to handle interviews. If times are lean, he keeps his hand in by getting some ordinary, even menial work, and perhaps tries to improve his qualifications. And all the while

he never allows himself to give up hope. He keeps alive his ambition to be ready for the break when it comes. And then when the vacancy finally comes, he is ready to show his mettle. This is a very active work awaiting a future event, and it involves work on oneself so as to be well prepared for the occasion whenever it might be. There must be the conviction that the day will most certainly come, and the determination to be ready when it does come. Today's Gospel reminds us that Christ will most certainly come at the end, and it is imperative that we be ready for his coming. The Gospel reminds us that every one of us will see the end of the world. The troubles we experience in our own lives and in the world at large give us a picture in advance of the troubles which will mark the end. And then we shall all see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with his full power and majesty. He will come to judge the living and the dead.

To prepare for this, our Lord tells us in today's Gospel, "look well to yourselves, not letting your hearts grow dull" (Luke 21:25-28,34-36). That is to say, we must be continually working at our

spiritual life, our life of union with Jesus. For the day of the Lord will come suddenly, our Lord says, like the spring of a trap. A trap springs in an instant, once triggered. So, our Lord says, keep watch, praying at all times so as to be found worthy. Let us then rouse ourselves to begin again this active awaiting for the coming of Jesus. When that day occurs, it will be all over, and our opportunities will be finished. So then, let us resolve to make use of this next liturgical year to prepare for the coming of the Redeemer.

A Third Reflection:

Preparing for Jesus - Being Apostolic The first time Christ came was by his birth on the first Christmas, and we celebrate that coming on Christmas Day and in the Christmas season. As an extension of that first coming at Christmas, he continues to come into our lives daily. He knocks continually at the door of our souls, and we should be constantly preparing for this by a deep and earnest spiritual life. There is his coming at our death when he takes the faithful Christian with him into eternity. There is his final coming at the end of time when he will come

in glory to judge the living and the dead. These are the comings of Jesus for which we should be actively preparing. Life could be defined as an active preparation for the coming of Jesus and this ought to characterize the aim of every single day. Advent is the liturgical time of waiting for Jesus, our most beloved of friends. It is a time to give to Jesus the greatest possible welcome into our hearts. This we do by removing the obstacles to him and by loving and serving him more generously every day. For our Lord said that ‘whoever loves me will keep my word and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him.’ This kind of coming occurs in our life of prayer, in our service of others, and in the worthy reception of the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist. Let us remember too, that welcoming the coming of Jesus into our lives is not just a matter between him and me, and no one else. Jesus wants us to help others prepare actively to welcome Jesus into their hearts too. That is to say, we must prepare for Christ's coming by being apostolic.

I once read in a Sydney parish bulletin how forty-five years before, the Catholic children in the public school of that parish had no religion classes. A lady of that parish approached the parish priest and the public school principal, and even though she had no training, started lessons with only the little penny catechism as her teaching aid. She was given a shed in which to conduct her classes. Although conditions were difficult, she did not give up. She was preparing her children to welcome the coming of Christ into their hearts. As numbers grew she encouraged other parishioners to help. She succeeded in motivating not only the children she taught, but the parents and other parishioners. This led to training courses. And after many years she received a special blessing from the Pope. Subsequently she went to a school for handicapped children and ran classes there as well. That is the true spirit of Catholicism. Each parish should as a community be apostolic, and there are numerous ways any parishioner can engage in the apostolic work of the Church. The apostolate consists of helping people to prepare for the coming of Jesus into their hearts now, at the end of their lives, and at the end of time.

During this special liturgical season of Advent, let us revive in our hearts the sense and the aspiration constantly to prepare for the coming of Jesus in our own lives and in the lives of others.

Monday of the First Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Jer 31: 10; Is 35: 4 Hear the word of the Lord, O nations; declare it to the distant lands: Behold, our Savior will come; you need no longer fear.

Collect Keep us alert, we pray, O Lord our God, as we await the advent of Christ your Son, so that, when he comes and knocks, he may find us watchful in prayer and exultant in his praise. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 2: 1-5; Psalm 121; Matthew 8:5-11

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. Lord, he said, my servant lies at home paralysed and in

terrible suffering. Jesus said to him, I will go and heal him. The centurion replied, Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it. When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 8: 5-11)

The prayer of humble faith

It does not take long to learn how great are our needs in life. There is our need of health and means of support. We need friends and assistance in fulfilling our ambitions and responsibilities in life. These and a host of other indicators of man's dependency lead him to seek the help of *God*. But it can seem to us that God is a long way off. We do not see him, nor hear him, nor does he

seem – at least at first impression – to be making any difference to the course of the world and to the course of our life. One's life seems to depend simply on the natural forces and general environment of which one is a part. This is why it is such a boon to man to have received the revelation God has made of himself. God the Son became man and dwelt among us. Man has seen God in the flesh and has come to know him first hand, and the Church will bear witness to this for all generations to come. The Church possesses the apostolic testimony about Jesus Christ and together with this testimony or deposit of faith, she possesses the grace of the Holy Spirit to dispense to her own children and to the world. This is because the same Jesus who walked the earth is present in his body the Church. Just as the disciples knew and spoke to the Lord then, so we can know and speak to the same Lord now. They were able to do so directly by sight and hearing, and we, without seeing, do so now by faith. Faith is the key and the foundation. If we have faith, all will be well. It will link us directly to Jesus who abides in his Church. Now, the first thing which immediately strikes us in reading the Gospel passage for today

(Matthew 8: 5-11) is that anyone at all may unhesitatingly approach our Lord in faith. In Jesus, God is shown to be so very available, so very accessible. Our Lord, surrounded by his disciples and having entered his town of Capernaum, is approached by a centurion, no less. We may presume he was of the typical religion of Imperial Rome with its beliefs in various gods, numina and ancestors. He himself *may* in his personal belief have approximated to the Judaic monotheism, but the point here is that he approached Jesus in his need, and Christ responded immediately.

Let us notice our Lord's friendly readiness to answer his petition and all that the meeting between the two revealed. The centurion merely placed his petition before our Lord – perhaps out of profound respect, hesitant to be more specific in his request. He did not ask our Lord to come to him. Our text does not show him suggesting to our Lord some specific concrete action. He simply presented the need, "*Lord, he said, my servant lies at home paralysed and in terrible suffering.*" We are surely reminded of the request of Christ's holy

mother in the Gospel of St John: "*They have no wine.*" That was all, but that our Lord would do something to solve it, she had no doubt. "*Do whatever he tells you,*" she told the assistants. In like manner, the centurion presented his need and our Lord immediately responded. Moreover, Christ did not simply give a word of healing, reducing his involvement with the centurion to the moment of this meeting. He immediately offered to *go with the centurion* to his dwelling to heal the servant. This would mean being in the centurion's company and thus drawing both the centurion and his servant even nearer to himself and, therefore, to God. This honour was, it seems, too much for the humble centurion to propose or accept. But it did evoke from him a striking expression of such humble faith as to amaze our Lord: "*The centurion replied, Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it*" (Matthew 8: 5 11). At this our Lord turned to those following him and held up before

them all the faith of the centurion. Moreover, he said there would be others like him beyond the household of God. What this teaches us is that our Lord loves to be approached by those with humble faith in himself, asking him to help them in their needs. Did our Lord show the slightest reluctance before the request of the centurion? Not the slightest. The centurion did what was most pleasing to him and he immediately granted his request and healed the servant with his word.

The example of the humble faith of the centurion has passed into the life of the Church at its most sacred moments. During the very celebration of the Eucharist, just before the faithful are to receive the same Jesus who healed the servant at the centurion's request, the priest (with the congregation) uses words closely approximating the centurion's prayer: *Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.* Let us unhesitatingly approach Jesus our Lord in all our needs, no matter how great they are. Let us approach him with humble faith, confident that he

will hear our prayer in the way he knows to be best. This faith will be most pleasing to God.



Tuesday of the First Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Zec 14: 5, 7 Behold, the Lord will come, and all his holy ones with him; and on that day there will be a great light.

Collect Look with favour, Lord God, on our petitions, and in our trials grant us your compassionate help, that, consoled by the presence of your Son, whose coming we now await, we may be tainted no longer by the corruption of former ways. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 11: 1-10; Psalm 72:1-2,7-8, 12-13, 17;
Luke 10: 21-24

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the

Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Luke 10: 21-24)

Faith in Jesus For the convinced Christian, one of the most intriguing of phenomena is the lack of religious conviction among so many co-religionists. When I speak of conviction I refer to conviction as manifested *in practice*. If a person claims to be a convinced Catholic and shows virtually nothing of Catholic practice in his life, little can be said of his claim of personal conviction. He may have certain religious convictions but they can scarcely be described as true Catholic convictions. There are great numbers of Christians and there are great numbers of Catholics. But their religious practice is, relative to their numbers, statistically low. This is not to say they are bereft of religion, for to say this would involve a different form of measurement. For the

Christian who perceives the grandeur of the Person of Jesus Christ and what he brings to those who believe in him, this lack of *practice* is a source of wonderment. The moral beauty and the utter uniqueness of Jesus Christ! As St Paul writes, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). All that I lost I consider rubbish in order that I may gain Christ! In our Gospel today our Lord is portrayed as filled with joy in the Holy Spirit, and he praises his heavenly Father, the Lord of heaven and earth, because he has revealed to the little and ordinary ones the mysteries of the Kingdom. The wise, and those who pride themselves on being insightful and clever in matters of religion have been kept from the knowledge of this revelation. Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, "you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children." Thus did he pray in praise of his heavenly Father. Then he turns to his disciples and says to them privately, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you

that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" (Luke 10: 21-24).

What Christ was seeing was the deepening realization among his disciples of his own Person and teaching. He experiences this same joy when he sees this happening in us. As we grow in our faith and realization of the mystery of Christ, so does the joy of God increase. On one occasion our Lord told a parable of the wandering soul – he is like the sheep that strays. The shepherd goes after him and when he finds him it gives him more joy than do all the sheep that did not stray at all. Our Lord concludes that there is more joy in heaven at one repentant sinner than there is over the many who did not stray. We can cause joy in heaven, then, by our repentance. Our Lord is not implying that many more do not stray from him than do – the statistics would suggest otherwise. Nor is our Lord suggesting that God takes our faith and fidelity to him for granted. On the contrary, for here in our Gospel passage today we are shown that Christ is "full of joy through the Holy Spirit" at the sight of faith in his disciples. Our faith

in Jesus and in his revelation is a cause of immense joy to Christ. If we wish to please God, then the greatest thing we can do is to believe profoundly in Jesus Christ and his word, and shape our lives accordingly. It is the work par excellence in life that God wants us to do. We may have success in the world, we may do great good as the world judges it, we may live a life that we can take pride in – all of which has its praise. But if we neglect our faith and sink into the vast stream of those who do not practise the faith they have been granted, then life will have been a failure. We can never please God by such a course. The tragedy is that so many appear to be indifferent to the prospect that the practical course of their lives is displeasing to God, precisely because of the neglect of their faith in Christ. The case is different, of course, with those who do not know Christ because they have not had the opportunity. Not so with the wise and the clever to whom our Lord refers in our Gospel passage today. The implication is that their lack of spiritual perception is their own responsibility. Their pride cut them off from the gift of the Father's revelation of Christ. Let us pray for a profound faith in Jesus Christ.

During Advent we celebrate the coming of the Redeemer to mankind. The most tragic drama being played out in the universe is the acceptance or rejection of this one and only Redeemer. Jesus Christ is the only Saviour of the world, the only name under heaven by which men may be saved, the only way to the Father. The path to salvation lies in faith in Jesus Christ, expressed in *practice*. He is the image of the unseen God. Let us pray for an understanding of this and the grace to *live according to it*. Every one who has the gift of faith has the calling to live by it and to bear witness to it before the world. It is thus that we give joy to Christ.



Wednesday of the First Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Zec 14: 5, 7 Behold, the Lord will come, and all his holy ones with him; and on that day there will be a great light.

Collect Look with favour, Lord God, on our petitions, and in our trials grant us your compassionate help, that, consoled by the presence of your Son, whose coming we now await, we may be tainted no longer by the corruption of former ways. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 25: 6-10a; Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6;

Matthew 15: 29-37

Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and

the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way. His disciples answered, Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd? How many loaves do you have? Jesus asked. Seven, they replied, and a few small fish. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. They all ate and were satisfied. Afterwards the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. (Matthew 15: 29-37)

Compassion It is almost proverbial that the striking thing about the world is the stark fact of human need and suffering. Now, why is this so? Why is the world not *entirely free* of evil and suffering? Some might say that this is a pointless question and one that would scarcely occur to very many people. The world is what it is and that's that – the

real point being that we must do something about it. This is true, but let us situate this question in the company of another and more fundamental question. Many years ago there was a movie and in one scene a mother was shown holding her young child. The scenery was broad and full, showing the hills, the plains and the sky. Suddenly the child looked up at his mother and said, Why isn't there *nothing*? A look of incomprehension came over the face of the mother, who fell silent. But it was a very fair and profound question. Why is there not *nothing*? There is no objective reason that *requires* that the world exist (except that it *happens* to exist). The world, from the mere nature of things, is not *necessary*. Everything in it appears to come into being and pass away through the agency of other things. Manifestly then, nothing in it need exist, yet of course everything in it does exist. But why is there not *nothing*, instead? An ensemble of contingent things – things dependent and conditional – each of which exists only because of the action of other contingent things, cannot provide the ground for the fact that it does exist. Its ultimate ground for existence must lie outside itself and in something that must exist. Now, a similar question may be

asked about the all-pervasive fact of evil, need and suffering that we are reminded of in our Gospel passage today. Why is the world like this at all? Could it not have been free of suffering, even though the mind and imagination can scarcely embrace such an idea because it is so foreign to our experience? For many, just like the fact of the world, so too the fact of evil, need and suffering does not require a fundamental explanation. That is just how things are. But surely an explanation is needed. A world that is radically contingent requires its explanation – that explanation is found in a Being beyond it that is absolutely necessary. Just so, the presence of evil and suffering surging everywhere in the world requires its explanation, an explanation which seems to be beyond us. Why is the world so radically wounded, so crippled, always crying out for relief and always hurting? It appears to have been dealt a blow at its root and it never seems to recover. Indeed, this wound inclines man – who is its master and steward – to moral evil.

It has been revealed to us why this is so: at the beginning of human history, Man rebelled against his loving Creator. In doing so he

unraveled the connecting thread that held together his own integrity and wholeness as a person and set him adrift from his Maker. He snapped asunder the linchpin of his own moral and spiritual life, and the entire structure of his person sank into a state of hopeless moral sickness — though the imprint of the Creator did remain to an extent. Man did not become totally depraved and, let us say, virtually a demon. There remained a natural yearning for God, but the integrity of his powers were a shadow of what they were when they came from the hand of God. In any case, his communion with God, which was the natural life of his soul, had been dealt a death blow. He was in his nature set adrift from God, and this had been his own doing. The unravelling continued from generation to generation as something now inherent in man's fallen nature and it flowed from parent to offspring as a vast fault-line. Thus was the world affected so profoundly by the sin of man and there could be only one answer. The Creator himself would have to fix it all up, and from the foundation. That is a further matter, but here we are contemplating the state of the world as brought about by man — a state suggested by our Gospel passage today. Crowds brought the

"lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others" to Jesus, "and laid them at his feet." The world is crippled. Such is the mysterious fact and were it not for revelation, we would not have known why. Man might even have come to think that the Source which gives to the world its being must Itself be somehow very limited or even evil. But in Jesus Christ there is presented to us the revelation of the true character of the loving Creator and Lord of all. God does not want the world to be as it is found to be. He is not like that himself and he has all the power needed to transform it. In our Gospel passage today there is revealed, not only the fallen state of the world, but the goodness and power of its Creator. God is shown to be powerful and good, all good. We read that Jesus "healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing" (Matthew 15: 29-37).

We read that our Lord was full of compassion for the crowds and he proceeded to satisfy their hunger, taking a handful of food and feeding the vast crowds with it. While on the one hand the world is

broken and often very cruel, God is revealed to be utterly different. He is absolutely good, compassionate, loving and all powerful. We can be filled with hope if only we entrust ourselves to his loving and almighty care, making it our business to know, love and serve him here on earth. This we do by following lovingly in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. So then, now I begin!



Thursday of the First Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Zec 14: 5, 7 Behold, the Lord will come, and all his holy ones with him; and on that day there will be a great light.

Collect Look with favour, Lord God, on our petitions, and in our trials grant us your compassionate help, that, consoled by the presence of your Son, whose coming we now await, we may be tainted no longer by the corruption of former ways. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 26: 1-6; Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 19-21, 25-27a;
Matthew 7: 21, 24-27

Jesus said, Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and

beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7: 21, 24-27)

Building on the Rock When we read these words of our Lord we immediately think – or we should immediately think – of their application to our personal lives. I say to myself that I am a Christian. I believe in Christ. I follow him in my everyday life. I worship every Sunday and do not regard Sunday as being just another working day. I am faithful to my wife or husband, even though it is difficult at times. I dedicate myself to my family. I keep the Ten Commandments in the main. I pray every day. But what about those things in my life I know I am *not* doing and which I should? Do I give to the *poor*? Am I hoarding my possessions for selfish and unnecessary reasons? Let me ask myself a deeper question: what is the real

foundation of my life, and on what is it built? Undoubtedly I wish to establish my life on a sure and sound basis and this is certainly what God wants me to do. He wants me to do all I can to ensure that the gift of life which he has bestowed on me flourishes. Christ came in order that I might have life and have it in abundance. But there is a tremendous temptation, subtle, constant and barely noticeable because so many fall into it. It is to lay a basis to our lives which is to an extent based on the will of Christ, but to a *fair extent also* based on the values of this world alone. We fail to be thoroughgoing in thinking according to the mind of Christ. Let this mind be in you, St Paul writes, that was in Christ Jesus. For this reason our Lord warns us in today's Gospel passage: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Now, to know the will of our Father in heaven we have the assistance, not only of the word of the inspired Scriptures, but the word of the Church to whom the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit. The Church, speaking in the name of Christ, has formally applied the doctrine of Scripture and Tradition to life in the world. That is to say, if

we wish to live in union with God and build on rock the house that is our life in the world, we ought carefully study the Church's *social teaching*.

But Christ's words in today's Gospel not only apply to me personally, to my own living of the Christian life each day in my family and workplace setting. The social, political and economic life of the world ought be based on the teaching of Jesus Christ. The political and economic life of society is continually in the news and the life of society ebbs and flows like the surging sea. At times there is a hurricane, at times all is calm, at times the wind and the waves are favourable to the craft in which mankind is sailing. But at times it threatens to swamp the vessel and there have been stark and sombre moments over the centuries when economics and politics have failed. We think of the great Depression of the early 1930s and we may think of the serious economic difficulties of 2008 and 2009. Is there any hope of finding a solid basis to the life not only of individuals but of the world? Indeed there is, and the key lies in the words of Christ in

today's Gospel. He speaks of the rock that is the foundation of the house, and obedience to his word is that rock. "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock" (Matthew 7: 21, 24-27). Now the question is, what does this mean in practical terms for the world at large? Is there any authoritative word which applies the teaching of the Son of God made man to society, to the nations, and to the world at large such that the entire edifice can be built on rock? There is, and it consists in the formal social teaching of the Church – if only the world would listen to it! At times the world has listened, as it did when Pope John XIII published his great Encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*). But there has been a whole stream of great Social Encyclicals and on June 29 of 2009 Pope Benedict XVI published yet another, *Caritas in Veritate*, (*On integral human development in Charity and Truth*). There can be no doubt that if the world were to listen to the

voice of the Successor of St Peter and act accordingly, the house would be laid on rock.

Let us in our thinking be careful as to the basis on which we are proceeding. When we form our plans as to life ahead, let us be clear in our minds as to the surest foundation. If we hear, know and obey the will and teaching of Christ, the house of our life will be built on rock. The same applies to the entire world of economics, politics and social life. If mankind were to hear and obey the will of Christ, all would be built on rock. That word of Christ is uttered by the Church which Christ built upon the rock that is Peter, that Church to whom our Lord said, "he who hears you, hears me; he who despises you despises me; and he who despises me despises the one who sent me" (Luke 10:16). Let us then resolve to hear the word of Christ and his Church and put it faithfully into practice.



Friday of the First Week in Advent

Entrance Antiphon Behold, the Lord will come descending with splendour to visit his people with peace, and he will bestow on them eternal life.

Collect Stir up your power, we pray, O Lord, and come, that with you to protect us, we may find rescue from the pressing dangers of our sins, and with you to set us free, we may be found worthy of salvation. Who live and reign with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 29: 17-24; Psalm 147:1-6 ; Matthew 9: 27-31

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, Have mercy on us, Son of David! When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, Do you believe that I am able to do this? Yes, Lord, they replied. Then he touched their eyes and said, According to your faith will it be done to you; and their sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, See that no one knows about

this. But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region. (Matthew 9:27-31)

Christ Have Mercy! Advent is the season of the liturgical year when we think of Christ's coming into our lives, and the Church presents for our contemplation various Gospel scenes which illustrate features of his coming. Let us then place ourselves in the scene of today's Gospel in which our Lord comes into the lives of two blind men. We are told that he "went on from there" and "two blind men followed him, calling out, Have mercy on us, Son of David!" (Greek, *have mercy: eleeson*). Let us remember another occasion when the blind man Bar Timaeus (Mark 10:47), sitting by the roadside begging, heard that Jesus was passing by. He immediately and vociferously called out to him that he show mercy. The prayer (*eleeson*) was the same as that of the two narrated in today's Gospel. The crowds could not stop him calling out for Jesus. As soon as the sound of the blind man's cries reached his ears, Jesus stopped and ordered that the man be brought to him. That is to say, Christ responded *immediately* to the

blind man's appeal. He was brought before him, was asked what he wanted, and then was immediately healed according to his faith. That blind man – whose name the author of the Gospel knew well – followed Jesus on the way. So on that occasion our Lord gained yet another disciple who perhaps was known in the infant Church. In our Gospel today, the two blind men also appeal for mercy. The implication is that in their case our Lord did *not* stop but carried on, for we read that they followed him and it was only when he went indoors that the two blind men got to him and presented their petition. Our Lord asked if they believed he could do this for them. At their saying they did believe this, he immediately cured them. The point here is that our Lord's response is different in each case. In the first there was no delay, in the second (today's) there was a delay, requiring persistence on the part of the two blind men. We remember our Lord and the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15: 21-28). She pursued him with her cries on behalf of her daughter. But he did not answer her a word. Finally she "cornered" him, we might say, and had it out. Our Lord praised her for her great

faith and persistence despite the initial rebuff, and sent her off, her daughter healed.

Two things we are surely reminded of by our Gospel passage today (Matthew 9: 27-31). The first thing is that Christ comes bringing the mercy of God. The entire Scriptures reveal that God is a God of mercy. He is rich in mercy. The world and human life surges and throbs with need and suffering. It hurts, it limps, it struggles and it staggers along. The world, we might say, needs a walking stick and two crutches besides, with a hearing aid and strong spectacles. Human life presents itself as a constant patch-up job. The car is always breaking down. The lights are always failing. Why is this so? Why is this beautiful world and this grand thing we call the life of man so often gasping for breath? We would never know the answer to this question were it not revealed. The fundamental reason for the suffering that plagues the life of man is man's own original and then personal sin. Because of sin he is bereft and he is adrift. But God our Creator is rich in mercy. He is full of compassion. It is Christ who reveals the

love and power of God. His almighty power, in the face of human suffering, reveals itself in mercy. Jesus Christ is our merciful Lord. To him, to Jesus, we can say with the two blind men as with Bar Timaeus - Christ (i.e., anointed Son of David!), have mercy! The Church makes the prayer of the two blind men of our Gospel today and that of Bar Timaeus her own prayer at the start of every Mass, during the penitential rite. We all say, Christ, have mercy (*Christe eleeson*)! I remember watching a Polish movie and in it a Polish Christian died under a hail of arrows from the Islamic fighters. As he went down he repeated out loud, *Christe eleeson!* In all our needs we ought turn to Christ the incarnate God, appealing for mercy and confident in his power and love. But there is a second point we are reminded of in today's Gospel passage. In our requests we are not having recourse to magic. It is God to whom we address ourselves, and he is free and he knows what is best for each of us. Christ kept going when the two in our Gospel today appealed to him. They had to follow and keep asking. So did the Canaanite woman. What would have happened if

they had thought that he was not interested in helping them or that in fact he could not? They would not have been healed.

All prayer involves an exercise and a test of faith, especially, perhaps, the prayer of petition. The test of our faith will come when we ask and do not seem immediately to receive. The instances in Scripture just mentioned involved a delay by Christ in his response to their prayer. If there is a seeming silence on the part of Christ in respect to our prayers, will we give up on him and on the revelation that he is all powerful and rich in mercy? Let us also notice a detail: the two blind beggars, having been granted their request, were *not* obedient to our Lord's strict command to keep silent as to their healing. Let us pray with persistent and obedient faith in the divine mercy, trusting that Christ will answer our prayer in the way that is best for us and most in accord with his saving plan.



Saturday of the First Week in Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 80 (79): 4, 2 Come and show us your face, O Lord, who are seated upon the Cherubim, and we will be saved.

Collect O God, who sent your Only Begotten Son into this world to free the human race from its ancient enslavement, bestow on those who devoutly await him the grace of your compassion from on high, that we may attain the prize of true freedom. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 30:19-21.23-26; Psalm 147:1-2, 3-4, 5-6;

Matthew 9:35-10:1.6-8

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful but the

workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. (Matthew 9: 35-10:1.6-8)

An Apostolic Friendship

There are many things which are distinctive about the Christian religion. Buddha discovered, he believed, the path to peace and happiness, a happiness that transcended the suffering he saw all around him in the world. That path consisted in the attainment of detachment and Enlightenment. The person of Buddha himself was in no way at all the object of his religion. Mahomet set forth what he believed to be the revelations he had received and they concerned Allah and a life lived in obedience to him. Mahomet was not in any way the object of the religion he announced. So too with Zarathustra centuries earlier. These great

religious founders announced and established ways which pointed men away from the founders themselves to God as they conceived him, or at least to a transcendent goal. But the case is radically different with Jesus Christ. The religion he revealed consists precisely in an intimate friendship with *him*. He *himself* is the object of the Christian religion. In loving and serving him we love and serve the Father, for to see him is to see the Father, and this we can do only by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The man Jesus is the love of the Christian because the man Jesus is the one and only God, as is the Father and as is the Holy Spirit. Our Gospel passage today reminds us of the distinctive character of this friendship with Christ, which is the heart and soul of the Christian religion. It is a friendship which sweeps us up into a share in Christ's own mission. God became man, not simply to be with man as if his special presence is all that is to be said about his coming. He came to befriend fallen man, and the indispensable and necessary route to this was by saving man from his sins. That is to say, God became man in order to fulfil a saving mission, and his invitation to man to enter into friendship with him is an invitation to share simultaneously in

this saving mission. It is a very active friendship into which the Christian enters with respect to Jesus Christ. He is expected by his divine Friend to be, with him, a missionary. The form that this missionary character of his life of friendship with Jesus will take varies according to the calling and circumstances of a person's life, but missionary it will of necessity be. The Christian life is essentially apostolic.

We are reminded of this by our Gospel passage today (Matthew 9: 35-10:1.6-8) which describes our Lord's intensely missionary life. He did not appear publicly simply to gather friends and to spend his time enjoying their friendship. He appeared before the people, and it was as if a great shot had been fired into the air and the race begun. We read that "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." It was an intense race that he was running, a

race for souls and he needed many to join him. We read that, "he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." He invited people, his disciples, to be his friends precisely in running the race with him. A battle had to be won and the great tide had to be turned. There was a momentous work to be done for the world – a world which God so loved as to send his only begotten Son. So the pearl of friendship with Jesus means entering into his own great work and becoming his intimate precisely in his mission. We read in today's Gospel that, "He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give". For this reason the Church which Christ founded is essentially missionary. Its life and the life of all its members is one of friendship with the living unseen Jesus, and this is an essentially apostolic friendship. The friend of Jesus knows that the heart of his

Master is filled with compassion for the lost sheep. His Master, the good shepherd, wishes the disciple's prayers and his daily immersion in the world to be the means whereby he saves those being lost.

Our Lord told his disciples that he is the vine and that we are the branches. The Father wishes that we bear much fruit, fruit that will last. The greatest fruit of our lives is that we play our due part in winning souls for Christ. Every day this great work must be proceeding, be it in our families, with our spouse, our children, our acquaintances, with all those with whom we have contact, and in our daily prayers and sufferings offered up for the salvation of souls. Our friendship with Jesus which constitutes the heart of our Christian faith must be essentially apostolic. It must be a friendship which participates actively in Christ's saving mission. Let us be up and doing, then!



Second Sunday of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 30: 19, 30 O people of Sion, behold, the
Lord will come to save the nations, and the Lord will make the glory of
his voice heard in the joy of your heart.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, may no earthly undertaking hinder those who set out in haste to meet your Son, but may our learning of heavenly wisdom gain us admittance to his company. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Baruch 5:1-9; Psalm 125;
Philippians 1:4-6.8-11; Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene - during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all

the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.' (Luke 3:1-6)

The Spirit The liturgical season of Advent is the time when we relive the preparation for the coming of the Messiah, which God expected of his people. The word "Advent" refers to the *coming of God to us*. We place ourselves in the Scripture scenes of Advent in order to recapture the spirit of preparedness which should characterise our lives continually. While God has indeed come, nevertheless he is always coming. The rise of John the Baptist as a great prophet marked the climax of the long preparation recorded in the Scriptures for the coming of God to save his people. John's message was, God is about to come. "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him"

(Luke 3:1-6). The person of John the Baptist is an outstanding example of the dispositions with which we ought receive Christ our Lord. In the Prologue of John's Gospel, the figure of John the Baptist is placed before the reader from the outset, and he is the counterweight of the sad statement of the Prologue that the Word came unto his own and his own *did not receive him*. John is a great model of all those who worthily receive him. So during Advent let us contemplate the example of John the Baptist. But let us also go beyond John to the One who prepared him from before birth and during his childhood and youth, and who then placed him before the chosen people of God as a prophet of the Most High. I refer to the Holy Spirit. Every Sunday at Mass we proclaim the Nicene Creed together. It is a proclamation of our Catholic Faith and it is a prayer of praise and thanks to God for all he has done. In the Creed we state that we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life. He proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets. The office and ministry of the prophets as

recorded in the Scriptures is seen as especially the work of the Holy Spirit, and the ministry of John is a pre-eminent example of it.

As we read in the Gospel of St Luke (1:15,41), John was filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb. As St Luke says in the same chapter (1:78), John is the Elijah who was to come again, and this was confirmed by our Lord himself (Matthew 17:10-13). In John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit brings to its climax his work of speaking through the prophets prior to the Messiah. John is the "voice" of the Consoler who is coming. John comes to bear witness to the light, just as the Holy Spirit himself will do after Christ has gone to the Father (John 15:26). John the Baptist himself was very aware of the Holy Spirit, and he defined the mission of the Messiah as being the One who would baptize *with the Holy Spirit*. "I baptize you with water," he said, "but there is coming one stronger than I, and I am not worthy to undo his sandal straps. He will baptize *with the Holy Spirit* and fire" (Luke 3:16). As St John reports the Baptist's words, "He on whom you see *the Spirit* descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with *the Holy Spirit*."

Just as John himself was the work of the Holy Spirit, so too in announcing the coming of the Messiah, he was announcing the coming of the Holy Spirit. So it is that in beginning the Gospel with the ministry of John the Baptist, the inspired authors are reminding us of the work of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of the prophets up to John. They are also pointing to his future work in the life of the Church. Just as the Holy Spirit raised up John, so the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost to bring the Church to birth and to make it the instrument whereby we each of us receives this divine Gift. As John was a sign and a promise of the presence and action of the Spirit, so is the Church. As the Church is a sign and promise of the Holy Spirit for each of us, so we should be a sign and a promise of the Holy Spirit for the world. The Holy Spirit has been given to each of us at our Baptism. He is the same Spirit who came to John before his birth, and who sustained him in his mission through life. He has come to each of us to sustain us in our Christian vocation in life.

Let us think of the person and example of John the Baptist, who announced the coming of Jesus. John bears witness to Christ, and does so by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us, like John, welcome Christ as our Redeemer. Let us prepare for his continual comings to us, and for his final coming at the end. This we do by the grace of the Holy Spirit who led John the Baptist, and who wishes to lead each of us in the footsteps of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is our Consoler and our Friend, and it is his work to transform us into the image of Jesus.

A Second Reflection (Luke 3:1-6)

Christ's Church On one occasion a bishop made an appeal to all in his diocese. He asked that, during the season of Advent, they extend an invitation to as many people as possible who were inactive in their faith – family members, acquaintances, colleagues and friends – to return to the Church. He invited all to assure those to whom they extended this invitation that God's love and mercy was theirs. The bishop stated that all ought to make this invitation their responsibility and privilege, and to see it as a prompting from the Holy Spirit. It could be the day of

salvation for a person who is encouraged to be reconciled to God. Indeed, this apostolic spirit of invitation and welcome ought to be part and parcel of Advent, the liturgical season when we prepare to welcome the Saviour. It is the time of the Lord's coming into the lives of all, and by doing this we will facilitate the Lord's coming into the lives of others. We could ask ourselves whether we are truly aware and concerned that thousands drift from the practice of the Faith, that many abandon the Church and join fundamentalist Christian or non-Christian groups. If these wayward members of the Church were to challenge the average Catholic to tell them why they should remain, how many Catholics could give a compelling answer? Advent is a time of joyful homecoming, a time for the return of prodigal sons and lost sheep, a time to look for Christ and prepare the way for him, and a time to look homeward to our eternal Father. It is a time to reflect on whether we, who through the grace of God have not wandered from the Church, are giving the wayward and the lost a true witness to our faith in Christ and his Church. In the second reading today St Paul rejoices, remembering how the Philippians to whom he is writing "helped to spread the Good

News from the day you first heard it right up to the present" (Philippians 1:4 6.8-11).

In the Gospel today (Luke 3:1-6), St John the Baptist witnesses before many to the coming of Jesus, inviting all to prepare for the salvation of God. Advent is a time for bearing witness to Christ and his Church, and in this way preparing the way for the Lord in the lives of others too. The truth that Christ founded a specific Church is an especially important – if difficult – truth to bear witness to in our relativistic culture. Some who pride themselves on being "broad minded" advise those who are drifting away from the Church simply to follow their own conscience, and do what they think best, instead of actively helping them to think and do what is objectively right. Often being "broad minded" amounts to being indifferent to the truth about Christ and his Church. Our Lord said to Peter, "You are Peter - Rock - and on this Rock I will build my Church." And at the last Supper our Lord prayed that his flock would be one as he and the Father are one. There is one specific Church which was founded by

Christ. The second Vatican council taught that it is in and through Christ's Catholic Church alone that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. We are called to witness to the truth about the Church. Those outside the Church will judge it by the tenor and direction of our lives. Indeed, it is by the way we live our lives that Christ himself will be judged by many who do not know him. If our light is hidden under a bushel for lack of courage, or is dim because the oil of faith has run low, Advent is the time to pluck up our courage and get moving spiritually. During Advent let us meditate on the profound connection between Christ and his Church. Bearing witness to Christ includes bearing witness to his Church, especially before those who are abandoning the Church. Christ is the way to the Father, and the Church is the way to Christ.

All men are called to salvation, to an eternity of happiness in heaven. Christ and his body the Church – the Catholic Church he founded – is the way. We who know the truth about this, are called to

live it and to bear witness to it before others. During Advent let us resolve to do this.

A Third Reflection (Luke 3:1 6)

The Splendour of the Ordinary Different epochs of history suffer from different defects. Pope Pius XII wrote that the *sin* of the present age is the lack of a sense of sin. Another defect of our age is its lack of a sense of meaning or purpose. How many people feel they have little that is worthwhile to live for! This is so for many young people, and for many in early, middle or late adulthood. For example, I remember years ago taking a religion class in a State High School. In front of me was a girl in early adolescence. She put up her hand at one point and said to me that *Life is a bitch!* That was her attitude at her very early age. *Life is a bitch.* Life is harsh and thoughtless and hurtful. There is little of worth to live for. Or again, there are those who regard life as ultimately boring. Life is just a round of unending and pointless trivialities, and in this sense it lacks worth and meaning. Let us linger a little on *this* perception of life. Life might well appear to be full of

trivialities, if by this I mean little things that seem not to attract attention. But they need not be pointless, and to say a thing is small is not to say it is trivial. A beautiful home is built – with small and very ordinary bricks. The little humdrum things of everyday life can be the building blocks of something immensely noble, something with eternal consequences. That something of grandeur is God's kingdom, his reign in the hearts of those who welcome Christ his Son. We can contribute greatly to the extension of God's kingdom in our own daily sphere of life, made up as it is of so many seeming "trivialities." Life with all its little – and harsh – things is a grand challenge. It is not just boring nor is it a bitch.

In our Gospel today (Luke 3:1-6), John the Baptist announces the coming of the Kingdom. "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." He was preparing the people for the presence of Jesus, already in their midst. As we think of John then, let us think of him some thirty years before, this time still in the womb of Elizabeth. Mary, the mother of the Messiah, is visiting her kinswoman

Elizabeth in response to what the angel had told her. A simple event, unnoticed and very ordinary, but how typical of so much of life. She bore Jesus within her. What gives this ordinary scene its grandeur? It is the presence of Jesus, together with their acknowledgment of him. Mary went to Elizabeth, carrying with joy the unborn Jesus, and it is this presence of Jesus which Elizabeth rejoiced in. In that scene he was the object of their lives. So it is with us. What gives grandeur to our everyday life is the presence of Jesus, together with our heartfelt and constant acknowledgment of him not only in word but by our deeds. He is the object of our life, the One we are called to serve, the One whose mission offers so much meaning and hope for mankind. Each of us lives in the presence of One who is great beyond compare. Our life of service can involve, if we so choose, the direct service of Him. He in turn brings us holiness, making our daily service something holy and pleasing to God, and through our daily service of him and others he brings holiness to others. In this way, our humdrum life – that might seem to some a bore or a bitch – with its ordinary daily work is changed into something grand. Advent is a time to bring Jesus

into the little things of everyday life, and by doing this we make possible his coming into the lives of others.

Let us then keep alive the vision splendid in the ordinary life that God has placed us in. That vision splendid is the presence of Jesus and the power of our ordinary work to become a principal means of sanctification. As St Ignatius Loyola stated, all for the greater glory of God! We must see the presence of God in all things, including all the little duties of justice and charity that fill our days. Christ is there in all those humdrum duties of every ordinary day, awaiting our love and our service. To the work, then!



Monday of the Second Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Jer 31: 10; Is 35: 4 Hear the word of the Lord, O nations; declare it to the distant lands: Behold, our Saviour will come; you need no longer fear.

Collect May our prayer of petition rise before you, we pray, O Lord, that, with purity unblemished, we, your servants, may come, as we desire, to celebrate the great mystery of the Incarnation of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 85: 9ab and 10-14;

Luke 5:17-26

One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not

find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, Friend, your sins are forgiven. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone? Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . . He said to the paralysed man, I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home. Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, We have seen remarkable things today. (Luke 5: 17-26)

The Sacrament of Forgiveness

There are numerous instances of physical healings worked by our Lord in the Gospel accounts. He

drove out demons, cured the sick of various diseases, cleansed the lepers who sought him, healed the mute, the blind and the deaf, and he raised the dead. In our Gospel today there is something very different. We read that some men carrying a paralysed man on a stretcher arrived to present him before Jesus, but being unable to do so because of the throng, went up on the roof and lowered him before the feet of Jesus in the midst of the crowd around him. To the astonishment of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the first thing our Lord did was to forgive the paralytic's sins. Our Lord would not have been just twisting the circumstance to the advantage of displaying his power to forgive sins. Rather, gazing into the eyes of the paralysed man, he would surely have seen the thought of his sins that profoundly troubled that man's soul. Perhaps the paralysed man judged that his sins were in good measure the reason for his physical affliction. Perhaps he saw with clarity the trail of sin that marked his life and how helpless he was in the face of its weight. Gazing on him with compassion, our Lord could see that his sins constituted his greatest affliction and that he was indeed sorry for them. It was the hidden shadow hanging over his

broken and helpless life, the affliction above all that needed to be taken away. At this he proceeded to forgive his sins, and his manner of doing so gave the clear impression that he was doing so *on his own authority*. He was exerting a divine power as if this power was his very own, acting as God would act. It astonished the Pharisees, who immediately understood its implications: "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but *God alone*?" Abraham never presumed to forgive the sins of another. Nor did Moses. Nor did the prophets. When John the Baptist administered his baptism of repentance, no one accused him of presuming to forgive the sins of those who were baptized by him. It was a ceremony that sought God's forgiveness by an expression of repentance. Christ *himself* unhesitatingly forgave the sins of those he saw were repentant, and he did so in a way that manifested his divine authority.

Now, the question is, how are we sinners to attain this benefit granted by Christ to the paralysed man? How are we to approach Christ for his forgiveness? Of course, part of the answer is that we must

repeatedly turn to Christ repentantly *in our own hearts*, and indeed this personal acknowledgment of sin and request for pardon is an essential requirement for any forgiveness of sin. Our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the Publican holds up the Publican's prayer for pardon as that which justified him. The parable of the Prodigal Son shows the wayward son returning to his loving father to seek his forgiveness. We must then be truly repentant, we must acknowledge our sins before God and we must try to make up for them in union with the reparation offered by Christ in his sacrifice on the cross. But there is more to the forgiveness of sins than our own standing before Christ in prayer as did the Publican in the Temple, asking God for pardon. Christ exercised publicly the forgiveness of sins and he *handed this very power on* to the Apostles to be exercised on his behalf. As we read in the Gospel of St John (ch. 20), on the evening of the very day he rose from the dead, our Lord appeared in the flesh before the Eleven. He told them that as the Father had sent him, he now was sending them. With that he endowed them with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and *commissioned them to forgive sins*. "Whoever's sins you forgive they are forgiven. If you hold them

still bound, they are held bound." So what he did to the paralysed man and which provoked such a shock among the Pharisees during his public ministry, the risen Lord was now passing on to the Eleven whom he had just consecrated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The same gift he was granting to the Church, to be exercised by those who would receive from the Apostles and their successors in the ministerial priesthood. By the gift of Christ there is now present in the Church the same Jesus who acts to forgive sins in the way he did those of the paralysed man. This he does in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. This is a great Sacrament, and Christ's faithful ought to avail themselves of it frequently. In that Sacrament the grace of Christ cleanses from sin with power.

Of course, the forgiveness of sins is a benefit that Christ brings in various ways to the life of the Christian. It is brought to him in the first instance at Baptism. It is brought to him in his sincere prayer of contrition. It is brought to him in other Sacraments such as the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist. But it is

especially, formally and explicitly, in the Sacrament of Penance that Christ is present precisely and pre-eminently to forgive sins. Though the penitent does not see him, he is just as present, and forgives sins just as truly, as he did those of the paralytic in our Gospel today. Let us greatly prize the Sacrament of Penance.



Tuesday of the Second Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Zec 14: 5, 7 Behold, the Lord will come, and all his holy ones with him; and on that day there will be a great light.

Collect O God, who have shown forth your salvation to all the ends of the earth, grant, we pray, that we may look forward in joy to the glorious Nativity of Christ. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 40: 1-11; Psalm 96:1-3 and 10-13;
Matthew 18: 12-14;

Jesus said to his disciples, What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. (Matthew 18: 12-14)

Our Loving Father I am convinced that a very common struggle in the hearts of very many is that of bitterness. The vast majority of people in their heart of hearts have to struggle to a greater or lesser extent with anger, resentment and sadness. The bitter experiences of many begin when they are young, perhaps in their families, perhaps while being educated, perhaps during their early careers. Life brings its share of disappointments, mistakes, frustrations, tragedies and sorrows. Many would recognize that to an extent, such troubles as came their way were due in part to their own fault or limitations. Nevertheless they feel bitter at the injustice, the lack of consideration, the thoughtlessness, and the positive injuries which have come their way at the hands of various persons. This can carry over to their religion, and God – however he is conceived – can be gradually imagined as unconcerned, very distant, lacking in consideration and even vindictive. These attitudes to God may not be adopted formally and with full deliberation. Still, it is very likely that unless there is an effort to discipline one's religious imagination according to right reason and objective revelation, one's attitudes to life will shape one's attitudes

to God. If one resents what life has brought it is not unlikely that one will tend to resent God. I have often wondered whether the movements against God and religion initiated by various thinkers and individuals in history have their origins partly in their experience of, and attitudes to life. I present this as one factor among several accounting for the ambivalent image of God which has characterized much of human history. Looking at man in the broad sweep and prescinding from the mighty fact of what God has revealed of himself in history, man's *natural* image of God is uncertain. Man prays to God; he asks his favours and protection; he tries to make up with him by means of his cult and his sacrifices. But God or the gods seem distant and the world with its harshness and cruelty seem to be unchanged and unaffected in its course.

Ah! But this is not so – not at all! People would have every reason to be resentful with God if – only if – this broken world were to be a simple reflection of him. To an extent, of course, the world does reflect its Maker but this is why there is created being, and so much

beauty in the world. Despite the pallor, despite the sweat and tears, despite the sword and the fire and all the galloping across those who are helpless, there is love, self sacrifice and holiness. There are the beautiful valleys and plains, the stupendous waterfalls and soaring mountains. The world in its beauty does reflect its Maker, whereas its ugliness both moral and otherwise reflects not God but ultimately *the sin of man*. This has been revealed. So then, we must in all our experience of life and reality learn to discipline our thinking and our imagination in reference to the Ultimate behind all things, which is God. We discipline our thinking by holding fast to our Lord Jesus Christ and to all that he has revealed of God. *He* is the image of the unseen God, as St Paul writes. He who sees *me*, sees the Father, he himself declared. He tells us that the Ultimate and the Absolute of all things, visible and invisible, is nothing other than a most loving Father. Love is at the heart of all things, love is the Origin and the End. More astonishingly still, this Ultimate Love, this Father of all is so very near. He pursues us lovingly. He follows us anxiously. God our Maker is the ideal father, beyond any ideal that this life could

offer. The length and the breadth and the height and the depth of the love of God for us is beyond imagining. Christ our Lord used certain *images* to convey the reality of the Father's love and we ought cherish the images he uses. "If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matthew 18: 12-14).

God loves me. He loves each of us individually. As St Paul wrote, Christ loved me and gave himself up for me. As he wrote again, nothing can separate us from the love of God present in Jesus Christ. He will leave the ninety-nine and go after me if I stray from him. He is going after me now in all my straying from his holy will. In my everyday life I fail him in so many ways, for as the Scriptures observe, the just man sins seven times a day (Proverbs 24: 16). But God loves me and comes after me, seeking my conversion in every

aspect of my life. So then, I must recognize his love for me and turn back to him, entrusting myself to his keeping and to his holy will. Now I begin, then!

Wednesday of the Second Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Heb 2: 3; 1 Cor 4: 5 The Lord will come and he will not delay. He will illumine what is hidden in darkness and reveal himself to all the nations.

Collect Almighty God, who command us to prepare the way for Christ the Lord, grant in your kindness, we pray, that no infirmity may weary us as we long for the comforting presence of our heavenly physician. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 40:25-31; Psalm 103:1-4, 8 and 10;

Matthew 11:28-30

Jesus said, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11: 28-30)

Go to Christ! There are many who see no meaning in life except what *this* life can offer. If *this* life offers little, then life is almost meaningless. A person is wracked with physical debility brought on by, say, cancer or some powerful stroke. All that faces him is complete dependence on others for care, and scarcely a moment's true rest. If only his life would end! There is nothing for him to live for – so he thinks and so his friends think. His life is his and not someone else's – so why ought he not be free to end it and so attain the peace of death and oblivion? Such are the thoughts of those who see no meaning in life except what *this* life offers. Alternatively, it is discovered that the child soon to be born is afflicted with a terrible set of deficiencies which will pose a tremendous burden of care on his parents and for his part set the course for a life of continual dependence on others. His

"quality of life" will be, it is imagined, absolutely minimal. Or again, great numbers in an African country wracked by ethnic strife and mayhem are bereft of food, shelter, lodging and medical care. Families are torn asunder by death and pillage. There is no end to the grief and deprivation. What is each person to do? The instances of evil and suffering could be narrated endlessly. It is a beautiful world, but with good reason one could say that it a very ugly world. Now, it is one thing to point to the cause of this, and it is a further thing to point to the answer to it. On the one hand, the *causes* of human suffering are both immediate and ultimate. The more *immediate* causes can be discussed at length and should be sought and dealt with. The ultimate cause, revealed by God, is the sin of man, both original and personal. On the other hand, the *answer* to evil and suffering is also both immediate and ultimate. The immediate answers involve the generous service of those suffering on many fronts. The *ultimate answer* introduces our Gospel passage today. The ultimate answer to evil and suffering is the person of Jesus Christ. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to be its Saviour. He is the ultimate answer to the pain and sin of the world.

What does Christ say to the one who is weary and burdened with the sufferings of life? Our Gospel passage today gives us his words. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11: 28-30). This is no slick and quick answer and it will not satisfy the one who is not interested in Christ. Our Lord, then, addresses "*all* you who are weary and burdened." That is, he addresses *every* man and woman of human history who experiences the weariness of our broken world. Who else in human history has had the audacity to propose *himself* as the answer to the suffering of the world? But that is exactly what Christ does. He says to you, to me, to every one we happen to know, and to *all* men and women of every generation – saying it to them in all their personal individuality and not just *en masse* – each and all of you, *come to me!* He promises that if we do, if we truly come to him as our Saviour, then we shall find rest. But notice what he says is involved in coming to him. It means coming to him and taking up his yoke and learning

from him. This means embracing his person and his teaching in true faith and obedience. It means throwing in our lot entirely with him and, in faith, accepting the path of true discipleship. It means striving to be like the Master, who is gentle and humble of heart. He promises that if we do this we shall find rest – rest at the deepest level, rest for our *souls*. It is the soul of man that above all must have rest. If there is no rest in the soul of man, then all the material satisfactions of life, all the health and wealth of the world will leave him still suffering. If he has attained a profound rest of soul then all the material sufferings of life will be supportable. The pressing need for man is rest of soul. Christ assures all mankind that if they come to him and take up his yoke, learning from him, then he will give that rest of soul for which the heart of man constantly yearns. We were made to attain happiness and Christ reveals that *he* is the path to it.

Pope Benedict XVI once wrote that the atheist or agnostic ought try to live *as if* God exists, even if he does not yet have this belief. We might take the suggestion further and say to the one who is suffering

and who cannot see where the way ahead lies, Give Christ a go! Go to him. As Pascal might say, make him your wager. He says to each of us, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. But let us not go to him in a superficial manner, with our hearts still far from him. Give Christ a go! Cast in your lot with him and be part of his company. Those who have done this have attained rest of soul in the midst of terrible suffering. Moreover, he promises that at the very end, all suffering anyhow will pass away, every tear will have gone. Christ is the only Saviour of the world.



Thursday of the Second Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 119 (118): 151-152 You, O Lord, are close, and all your ways are truth. From of old I have known of your decrees, for you are eternal.

Collect Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the paths of your Only Begotten Son, that through his coming, we may be found worthy to serve you with minds made pure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 41: 13-20; Psalm 145:1 and 9, 10-13ab;
Matthew 11: 11-15

Jesus said, I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law

prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 11:11-15)

True Greatness One of the intriguing things about life and reality and which we tend to take for granted – because it is so pervasive – is the fact of *variation*. Nature films are the source of unending entertainment. In the world of plants and non-sensitive life there are myriads of species, and new species are often being discovered. The same applies to insects, reptiles, and at times larger animal life. The range of awareness which the animal kingdom manifests is breathtaking, and inasmuch as it is only man who possesses a *spiritual* principle, the awareness possessed by animal life shows the inherent capacity of matter under the hand of God. But the point I am referring to here is the universal presence of *variation* among created beings. There is greater and smaller, higher and lower, difference from one to the other. Within the vast human species, there is variation everywhere. Man differs from man not only in race, colour and creed,

but manifestly in capacity. There are men and women great in intelligence or in this or that gift, while there are ordinary men and women, and there are those bereft in capacity such as the retarded or those deprived because of this or that circumstance. At times God himself has pronounced on the greatness of some people. The angel Gabriel when addressing Elizabeth, the wife of Zechariah, said that her son would be *great in the sight of the Lord*. We are referring to John the Baptist. In our Gospel today our Lord said that "among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist." Of course this greatness of John the Baptist could not have been meant to signify just any kind of greatness. It could not have been meant to signify sheer holiness, for instance, for Mary the mother of Christ was, in all her lowliness, unparalleled in personal holiness. John was the greatest prophet in that dispensation prior to the coming of the Messiah. He was the greatest prophetic representative of the Old Testament and the greatest Forerunner of the One who would eclipse all in both the past and future, as the very Blessing of God.

Of course, it is not necessary to be prominent to be great. On one occasion our Lord was seated near the Treasury of the Temple and was observing a poor widow putting in two tiny coins. He told his disciples that she had put in more than all the others because she had given all she had to live on. In our Gospel today (Matthew 11:11-15) our Lord pronounces on the key to greatness. Great as John is in his person and mission as prophet of the One to come, yet "he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is *greater* than he." John was great precisely as a prophetic embodiment of the Old Testament revelation, and he pointed to what was much greater. He pointed to the person of Jesus, whose sandals he was not worthy to bend down and untie. In our Lord's words exalting the dignity of those who are in the kingdom of heaven, he is referring fundamentally to himself. The kingdom of heaven is nothing other than the lordship of God as present and available in the Person of Jesus Christ. In him is the fullness of the Godhead bodily, as St Paul expresses it. In him is to be found every heavenly blessing, and the one who is his friend and who shares in his life by the gift of grace is, by that fact, a member of the Kingdom of God. No matter how

lowly a person might be, how ordinary in talent and visible achievement, the more such a person is immersed in the person of Christ, the greater will be his standing in the sight of God. A person virtually unknown to the world can, in his heart, be buried with Christ in God. That person is the truly great one. Union with Christ is the answer to the universal quest for meaning. The twentieth century psychiatrist and author Victor Frankl wrote that the key to happiness in profoundly adverse circumstances is the possession of a sense of *meaning*. All men and women require a sense of meaning, and – let us add to Frankl’s words – meaning that is objectively *true*. It gives to their lives not only happiness but, indeed, a true grandeur. A life of union with Jesus Christ will bestow that meaning, that happiness and that grandeur before God amid all the obscurity and limitations which the ordinary life of the millions will necessarily involve.

Let us understand that however ordinary and seemingly insignificant our lives may appear to be, we have the key to greatness in the sight of God. It is a greatness that he, God, is pleased to regard as

such. It is a greatness that is lowly, after the manner of the greatness of the lowly Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ. It derives from a humble and loving union with Jesus Christ, a union which is marked by faith in him and obedience to the will of the Father. Let us understand then that to possess Jesus Christ and his friendship is to possess all.



Friday of the Second Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Behold, the Lord will come descending with splendour to visit his people with peace, and he will bestow on them eternal life.

Collect Grant that your people, we pray, almighty God, may be ever watchful for the coming of your Only Begotten Son, that, as the author of our salvation himself has taught us, we may hasten, alert and with lighted lamps, to meet him when he comes. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 48: 17-19; Psalm 1:1-4 and 6;

Matthew 11:16-19

Jesus said, To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market places and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking,

and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her actions. (Matthew 11:16-19)

The great opportunity It has been said that youth is the time of ambitions, while the later years of life is the time of regrets. That, of course, is a simplification but there is no doubt that as the years go on, the challenge is to keep alive the vision splendid, while realistically recognizing the many opportunities that have been lost. A person looks back and by hindsight can see this or that golden opportunity that was lost – if only I had taken notice of what my friend, my mentor, my parent, had said to me! If only I had grasped the opportunity my friendship with that person offered me! Lost opportunities! It is a feature of the years of maturity that this is recognized, and with it there ought to come the recognition of the opportunity that the remaining years of life still offer. The Pope visits one's country and hundreds of thousands pour out to see and be with him. He celebrates a great Mass in the largest venue of the capital city and throngs surge in to

participate. They recognize that it is an *opportunity* they do not wish to miss. Following his visit to the country, there are special publications containing his speeches and people are invited to study more carefully what they heard during the occasion itself. The *opportunity* they availed themselves of is something to be cherished and built upon. Opportunities! In the twilight of our life, our minds will go back and think of the opportunities that have been ours and of how we have or have not availed ourselves of them. Now, the greatest opportunity that mankind has had is the coming among us of God himself. God has visited his people. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. As St John writes in the prologue of his Gospel, we saw his glory, the glory of the only begotten Son, full of grace and truth. The world has had a tremendous opportunity in the coming of God the Son made man. But let us also notice what we might call the character of his coming. One would have thought that a single, one off intervention of the great God would have, as it were, brought the world or at least all those in a position to know of it, to a standstill in appreciative wonderment. But no. The case was and is very different.

In fact, through the ages God has offered opportunity upon opportunity to his wayward and sinful children. He tried this and tried that, calling Abraham, revealing himself to Isaac and Jacob, then to Moses and the prophets. God was now tender, now severe. In our Gospel today our Lord speaks of God endeavouring in different ways to bring his people to him, but all too often to little avail. "Jesus said, To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market places and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by her actions" (Matthew 11:16-19). Our Lord's own description of John suggests one who manifested severe self-denial and a way of life vastly different from that of the ordinary person. His critics said "He has a demon." In him God sent a great saint whose holiness was evident, and yet the opportunity was spurned. We might say that in John we have a symbol of all that God had done in pursuing

his people to that point. Finally he sent his very own Son. How different was Jesus Christ! His holiness was indisputable, so much so that he himself challenged his critics in a way that John would never have done: Can any of you convict me of sin? Or again, I always do what pleases my Father. But our Lord mixed with sinners, drew them near to him, ate with them and drank with them. He invited them to be his disciples. They loved his company and he mixed with all. He was accused of being a "glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." Matthew the tax collector was a member of the Twelve, no less. In our Lord's person and ministry we have revealed at its noblest level the solicitude of God who pursues wayward man till he finds him. He is the Good Shepherd who goes after the stray, leaving the ninety-nine till the stray is reclaimed.

Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ except our decision to separate ourselves from him. Let us take hold of this opportunity, then. God will do anything to save us and however riddled with sin we may be, God is the Beauty of our life. St Augustine,

converted from sin, made of his conversion a magnificent *opportunity*. Late have I loved thee, he could only exclaim, O Beauty, so ancient and so new! Late have I loved thee! Let us, sinners though we be, place ourselves in the company of Jesus, and gaze upon him. He is already gazing upon us with a loving smile. He is the Beauty of our hearts. Let us not lose this opportunity. Jesus Christ and his friendship is the abiding opportunity of every day. Let it not pass us by. So then, now I begin!



Saturday of the Second Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 80 (79): 4, 2 Come and show us your face,
O Lord, who are seated upon the Cherubim, and we will be saved.

Collect May the splendour of your glory dawn in our hearts, we pray,
almighty God, that all shadows of the night may be scattered and we
may be shown to be children of light by the advent of your Only
Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy
Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 48: 1-4. 9-11; Psalm 80: 2ac and 3b,
15-16, 18-19; Matthew 17: 10-13

*The disciples asked Jesus, Why then do the teachers of the law say that
Elijah must come first? Jesus replied, To be sure, Elijah comes and
will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they
did not recognise him, but have done to him everything they wished. In
the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands. Then the*

disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist. (Matthew 17: 10-13)

The great pattern There are many magnificent figures who were the protagonists of what the Christian calls the Old Testament. There is a magnificence about Abraham and his faith in God. We read how he understood God to have ordered him to sacrifice his son Isaac, which he thereupon prepared to do. In the event, God intervened to prevent the deed but Abraham's obedient faith had been manifested. We could go on to cite – as does the Letter to the Hebrews –example after example of outstanding faith exhibited by the Patriarchs, by Moses, the prophets and certain of the kings and priests. Particularly intrepid was the great Elijah, and we remember how he withstood the four hundred prophets of Baal. In that great demonstration of faith he vindicated the truth of Yahweh and dealt a tremendous blow to the worship of Baal. It was prophesied that in some mysterious sense Elijah would return to prepare the way of the Lord. We read in the Gospel of St John (Ch.1) that priests and Levites from Jerusalem had asked John the Baptist if *he*

were the Elijah who was to come. John said with humility that he was not, but in our Gospel passage today our Lord declares that he was. Years later when Luke wrote his Gospel, he included the prediction of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah – presumably the source being the Virgin Mary – that his son John would be great in the sight of the Lord and would act in the spirit and power of Elijah. John was the gift of God to his chosen people to prepare "for the Lord a people fit to receive him" (Luke 1:17), and as such was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Malachi (4:6). In John the Baptist, kinsman of our Lord himself, "Elijah has already come." But, sadly, "they did not recognise him, but have done to him everything they wished." The power of evil had been very great. There is in the Old Testament a pattern of moral magnificence and moral squalor, the two in conflict, and the latter all too often overcoming the former.

As already mentioned, in the third book of Kings, Elijah has his victorious showdown with the prophets of Baal (ch.18), and then he flees from the wrath of Jezebel and arrives at the Mountain of God,

Horeb. Horeb reminds us of the gripping story in Exodus of the meeting between Yahweh God and Moses on this same Mountain centuries before. At Horeb, Elijah has his famous conversation with Yahweh, and the theophany is very different from that granted to Moses. The Lord speaks within the gentle breeze, and he instructs Elijah to anoint Elisha the son of Saphat to be his successor (ch.19). Now anointed, Elisha becomes his disciple and his successor in waiting. Finally in the fourth book of Kings (ch.2) Elijah is taken up to heaven in the chariot and the whirlwind, while Elisha, now possessed of a double portion of his spirit, takes up the mantle and begins his own magnificent ministry. We can surely see in this a prefiguring of the prophetic mantle passing from John the Baptist to Jesus Christ, for Christ confirms that John was the Elijah to come. Elijah met with tremendous opposition, and John too, our Lord points out, was treated as they pleased. But Christ surpasses all in every respect. His miracles were far greater and more numerous, his teaching had a loftiness without parallel, and his holiness surpassed all before him. The scale of his rejection and his sufferings also far exceeded the suffering prophets

who had preceded him, and this is what our Lord alludes to in his conversation with his disciples today. "In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands" (Matthew 17: 10-13). And so it is that the patterns we perceive in the Old Testament illustrate the patterns we see in our Lord's life and ministry. Above all, as pointed out earlier we see the pattern of moral magnificence and moral squalor, with the moral squalor all too often overcoming the moral magnificence. But ah! The good is not definitively overcome. Precisely through sufferings, precisely through persecutions, the good prevails. Mysteriously, the Messiah has to suffer in order to enter his glory. He must suffer rejection at the hands of those who are evil if the world is to be redeemed. Just as John suffered, so too must the Messiah to whom was passed the prophetic mantle.

What this means is that the mystery of evil and suffering becomes a source of life and goodness. The pattern present all through the scriptures including the prophetic ministry of, for instance, Elijah and John, is supremely present in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Death

leads to life, if we die in God. It is the great revelation which God has given to a broken world. The Messiah by his life and death has lit up the meaning of the Scriptures which themselves point to him. By his life he lights up the meaning of suffering and death, if we suffer and die with him. Let us take up the mantle, then, as did Elisha from Elijah, and as did Christ from John. Our mantle is that of Jesus Christ.



Third Sunday of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Phil 4: 4-5 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near.

Collect O God, who see how your people faithfully await the feast of the Lord's Nativity, enable us, we pray, to attain the joys of so great a salvation and to celebrate them always with solemn worship and glad rejoicing. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Zephaniah 3:14-18; Isaiah 12;
Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:10-18

When the people asked John, "What should we do?" he answered, The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same. Tax collectors also came to be baptised. Teacher, they asked, what should we do? Don't collect any more than you are required to, he told them. Then some soldiers asked

him, And what should we do? He replied, Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely. Be content with your pay. The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, I baptise you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. (Luke 3: 10-18)

Thy will be done Let us reflect on that question put to John in our Gospel today: "What should we do?" There are several things which distinguish the human being, if viewed in the context of the sweep of history. Obviously, one is religion. Characteristically, man is *religious*. The anthropologist and archaeologist will take it for granted that religion has marked the society and culture of the people he is

studying. Another characteristic is that man is *rational*. He attains new knowledge not just by gazing at new things, but also by going from known to unknown by the power of reason. He can abstract from the singular, and form a concept – not merely an image. Another is that he has *work* in life – he typically has “a work” to do – and the better the person he is, the better he tries to do his work. Incidentally, what is “work”? This is not the moment for a philosophical discussion, but there is a sense in which “work” does not simply mean the expenditure of energy on some activity. A machine expends energy, but fundamentally its expenditure of energy is itself due to “a work” of *man*, the machine’s creator. Understood thus, the doing of “a work” is proper to human beings. Be that as it may, the point here is that a distinguishing feature of man is that he works – he has a work to do. We must “work” in order to live (unless we are living off the work of another), and we must also “work” in order to be happy and to flourish. The more we strive to do really good work, the happier we shall be. If a person does very little work, he gradually crumbles. If he does work that is poor when he could have done good work – again, he

gradually crumbles. Ordinary human experience of personhood and its need to work and work well, ought suggest to us things about God the Creator. His work is before us constantly, the work that is the universe. Our Lord once said to the leaders of the Jews who criticized him for healing on the Sabbath that, inasmuch as his heavenly Father was working, he too would work. God is hard at work, and it is inconceivable that God who is good would not do good work. What is to be said, then, of the miserable sights we see in man and nature, when both are the work of God's hands? We can only say what the owner of the harvest said of the weeds, in our Lord's parable, "An enemy has done this!" Now – and this brings us to the point of this reference to work, especially the work of God – what is it that God intends in all his work? Putting it differently, what is the will of God in all he does?

Ordinary human reflection would suggest to us that a good God wills not only to sustain things in existence, but to ensure that his creation greatly flourishes. Imagine a disease striking the fruit on an orchard farm. Who would suspect the owner of the farm to have

introduced the disease into the fruit of his farm, or *willed* it to develop? The idea would be preposterous. Rather, the will of the farmer is that his fruit *flourish*. He discovers the disease and then works night and day to eradicate it, and at great cost he succeeds. So too, precisely as creator, God means to do good work. His will is to bring life and not death. If we take as a basic assumption that God is good, we would expect that the disease of sin and death could not be his work. We would expect, instead, that he would be working to overcome sin and death as being a terrible blight on his work. Now, all of this philosophical expectation is confirmed by Revelation. God has "made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ" (Ephesians 1:9-11). As St John says in his Gospel (3:17), God did not send his son to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. The will of our heavenly Father is that "all men be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4). It was for this that Jesus came, to fulfil perfectly the saving will of his heavenly Father. This is the will of God, man's salvation and sanctification. This is his work, and in Christ the will of the Father has been perfectly

fulfilled once and for all. We pray to God our Father to unite our will to that of his Son, after the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints. We ourselves are radically incapable of this, but united with Jesus and with the power of the Holy Spirit, we can surrender our will to him. Thy will be done on earth as it is done in heaven! We ask that his loving plan be fully realized on earth as it is already in heaven. Let us pray that we may discern what is the will of God (Romans 12:2) and have the steadfastness to do it (Hebrews 10:36).

There are many joys in life, though the world be a broken world. One of those joys is the doing of good work. The best work that we can do, is to do as well as we can the will of God. This is what John the Baptist instructed those who asked him, "What should we do?" (Luke 3: 10-18). Christ did the will of his Father, and he did it perfectly even though so many rejected his work. If we do the will of God, Christ will give us a share in his joy. Even if the circumstances surrounding our work may be unfavourable and even crumble before us

– as it did, in certain respects in the life of our Lord – the joy of doing good work will be ours, for we shall have done the will of God.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2822-2827

(Thy will be done)

A Second Reflection: (Philippians 4:4-7)

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! What I want is your happiness. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

Christian Joy In the second reading St Paul tells us that we should rejoice, and that we should rejoice in the Lord always (Philippians 4:4-7). He says that what he wants is our happiness, and that this is what God wants. This is a tremendous thought. Everyone desires joy, and God wants it for us too. But God wants not just any joy, but his own

peace and joy to fill our hearts. We have all known many joys in life, but all too often they just slip away. So what is joy, so that we can cultivate it as St Paul exhorts us? And what brings about Christian joy? What are its sources? Of course, we cannot just decide to be joyful and expect that joy will be ours simply because we want it. Joy comes above all from love. Joy and happiness are found when we love and are loved, and it stands to reason that we shall find the greatest joy when we give ourselves to the greatest Lover, and that is God himself. Here then is the secret of possessing joy. Just as we cannot just have oranges, but must first have orange trees from which come the oranges, so we cannot produce joy without first producing its source, which is love. Love is a tree of which the fruit is joy. Joy is the fruit of love, that is, true and authentic love. One of the most obviously joyful of the saints was St Francis of Assisi. That is very much the reason for his universal appeal. He renounced all his material possessions and embraced poverty in imitation of Christ, and in his poverty he was supremely joyful. This was because he no longer clung to creatures, he was no longer attached to them. He saw beyond them to the God he

loved so deeply. His joy came from his union with God and his love for him.

So the main source of Christian joy is the knowledge that God loves us. With great joy St Paul exclaimed, Christ loved me and gave himself up for me! And our Lord's own joy came from the awareness he had of the Father's infinite love for him, the Son. So too, the Father's joy comes from his awareness of being loved by the Son. And that love which is the source of God's own joy is the Holy Spirit. That same Holy Spirit is poured into our hearts at our baptism, enabling us to know in faith the love God has for us and to grow in love for him in return. This is the source of Christian joy: to share in the love of God, to know he loves us and then to give our lives over to loving God totally in return. In the first reading (Zephaniah 3:14-18), the prophet Zephaniah predicts that God will be like a joyous lover singing with delight in the presence of his beloved, and that beloved is his own chosen people. *"The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult with joy over you, he will renew you by his love;*

he will dance with shouts of joy for you as on a day of festival." What a daring and wonderful image! And in the psalm, God tells us that we will draw water at the fountain of salvation. That fountain, the Christian knows, is the heart of Christ, who pours out his love. In today's Gospel (Luke 3:10-18), St John the Baptist speaks of God's law which his hearers were obliged to follow. But God did not merely give us his law. He gave us his Son, and with his Son the Holy Spirit who is the love of God. Our joy is the love of God. We are loved. Our religion is not just a matter of observing the divine law, even though God's law is the expression of his love and to remain in his love we must observe his law.

Christmas is the joy of God coming to us and the promise of one day going to him. Then our joy will be greater than our wildest dreams. We must prepare for that day of joy by struggling to increase and purify our love. In writing on joy, Pope Paul VI once wrote that *"the combat for the kingdom includes passing through a passion of love."* We must aim for the perfection of love. There are two obstacles

to Christian joy. The first is knowingly to refuse God what he wants of us. The second is the failure to believe how much God loves us. So let us make Advent the time when we renew our appreciation of the love of Jesus for us, and our resolve to live in his love. Joy will then be ours.

A Third Reflection: (Philippians 4:4-7)

Rejoice! *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice*, St Paul tells us. His verb (Rejoice!) is in the imperative: it is imperative that we rejoice! It is possible to go right through life lacking the joy our Lord means us to have even in the midst of many sufferings. Elsewhere the Gospel tells us that our Lord rejoiced in the Holy Spirit. We read that he gave a share of his own peace to the Apostles: Peace I leave for you, not the peace of the world, but my peace do I leave you. Our Lord means us to live lives of inner joy and peace, while carrying the daily cross of obedience to God's will in his footsteps. We are made to yearn for joy, and every Christian is called to a life of joy. If we hear that a person is joyful, and habitually joyful, we instinctively think that he has something which is very important, perhaps more important than

anything else. Too often people have the wrong kind of joy, a joy based on things that do not matter or that are even harmful. We have all known many joys: such as the prospect of exciting and satisfying work, a new area to live in, success in exams, but this kind of joy tends to slip away from us. So let us ask: What is true joy? Whence does it come? Through the prophetic words of John the Baptist, God directs that the rights of others must be respected and that the poor must be helped. These stipulations of God's law are manifestations of his love for needy man. In the psalm, God tells us that with joy we will draw water at the fountain of salvation. That fountain is himself. As St John tells us in the prologue of his Gospel, God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. We are loved by the Father as his children, and it is his Son Jesus who reveals the Father's love. He who sees me, our Lord said, sees the Father. Our religion is not primarily something, but Someone. Our salvation comes from holding on to Him. He, Jesus Christ, is the cause of our joy.

Our truest joy lies in God, and in the thought that God is near and coming soon. If we live for him, we can look forward joyfully to his coming. And that is the theme of Advent. Today, we can rejoice because Christmas is near. Christmas is the celebration of God's coming among us, a thought that should fill us with joy. It contains the great promise that he will come one day to take us to be with him forever. The thought of this second coming should fill us with joy. But it presumes that we are living in a way that will please Christ when he does come to take us. If we are, his coming will be the cause of unbounded joy. Living a life that is pleasing to God involves love, love received from God and love given to him. This love for God, planted in our hearts as a gift at our Baptism, has to be cultivated, made strong, and developed into a divine passion for God. Our Lord's passionate love for his Father and his passionate love for us is the example of this, a love shared by the saints and in a measure by ourselves, due to the grace of God. Now, there are two obstacles to this joy. The first obstacle to the joy God means us to have is knowingly to refuse God what he wants of us. Love involves a union of will and desire. How

can one love God and not be one with him in what he wants? We will not be happy as long as we disregard or refuse what God wants of us, because we will not be loving him. The second obstacle to joy is to fail to believe how much God loves us. St Paul once said that nothing, neither death, nor life, nothing seen or unseen can separate us from the loving concern of God as revealed in Christ. No matter what our circumstances, we must always believe that God loves and cares for us. This faith in God's love will be a great source of joy, but it requires much work on our part. We must not give in to discouragement or bitterness.

The love of God which is the source of true joy is God's gift. It is to be asked for, and it is to be nourished by the channels of grace. Those channels of grace are assiduous prayer, the devout reception of the sacraments – especially Mass, Holy Communion, and the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation – and the careful attempt to fulfil our duties and responsibilities. So let us take to heart the call to

joy! Joy will be ours if the love of God is the foundation of our lives. Let us make that the grace we ask of God today.



Monday of the Third Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Jeremiah 31: 10; Is 35: 4 Hear the word of the Lord, O nations; declare it to the distant lands: Behold, our Saviour will come; you need no longer fear.

Collect Incline a merciful ear to our cry, we pray, O Lord, and, casting light on the darkness of our hearts, visit us with the grace of your Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Numbers 24:2-7.15-17; Psalm 25:4-9;
Matthew 21:23-27;

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. By what authority are you doing these things? they asked. And who gave you this authority? Jesus replied, I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism where did it come from? Was it from heaven,

or from men? They discussed it among themselves and said, If we say, 'From heaven', he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men' we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, We don't know. Then he said, Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. (Matthew 21: 23-27)

Christ's Authority In our Gospel today a critical issue is raised: *the authority of Jesus Christ*. Our Lord enters the temple courts and begins to teach the people who were there awaiting him or who quickly gathered before him. The people accounted him a prophet and a great teacher, and for his part our Lord constantly displayed a sense of supreme personal authority in all the things of God. He pronounced decisively on matters in dispute among the religious experts. He took it upon himself to cleanse the temple of its commercial activity. He disregarded the cumbersome restrictions insisted upon in respect to the observance of the Sabbath, stating that *he* was no less than the *Lord* of the Sabbath. He even forgave sins on his own authority and proved his

authority to do this by miracles. In every respect he exuded religious authority. But, many wondered, what gave to him his assurance? What was the source of his authority? And so the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him and asked him, *By what authority are you doing these things?* In response to the question as it appears in our Gospel text today, our Lord points to the prophet they all knew, John the Baptist. What was the source of *his* ministry – was he commissioned by heaven or by some human authority? That is to say, was he a true prophet or not? Perhaps, on this occasion, the priests and elders had interrupted our Lord during his very teaching. As a result, the people may have been in the presence of these authorities when our Lord counter-posed his own question to *them*. If they denied that John was a prophet, the people present would have reacted with condemnation, and the leaders feared the people. But if they said he was a true prophet, it meant that his testimony as to Jesus being the promised One would have to be accepted. Our Lord in effect is saying that his authority comes from his heavenly Father who sent him. His authority is supported by the witness of John. Indeed, our Lord stresses

– especially with his disciples – that the entire prophetic tradition bore witness to him.

The Christian is profoundly convinced of the *supreme* authority of Jesus Christ. He is not just one of many religious authorities. One of the many benefits of studying the religions of man, especially the great world religions, is that it shows the religious yearnings of much of mankind. Man aspires to friendship with God to the extent that this is possible, and he wishes to live in such a way that God will not be displeased. Such a study will also show the distinctiveness of Christ. He claimed unique and full authority to teach man the way to union with God and how to live according to his will. He supported his claim by pointing to the witness of the prophets, to his miraculous activity which by its very character supported the revelation he was making, and by his incomparable teaching. Having risen from the dead and about to ascend to his heavenly Father, he told his disciples that *all authority* in heaven and on earth had been given to *him*. He is the supreme authority in all that pertains to salvation and man's relationship

with God. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is the Lord of all mankind and of every nation, including those who know little of him or who have repulsed him. There are countries whose governments are still communist, particularly in Asia and parts of Africa. They characteristically do not like religion and they particularly dislike Christianity. Though they do not know it, Christ is their Lord. Because Christ is the universal King, he has entrusted his Church and her members with a universal mission: *Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all I have commanded you.* It is the will of God that Jesus Christ be recognized as having all authority in heaven and on earth, and that his teaching govern all of human life. The question of authority which the chief priests and the scribes raise in our Gospel today (Matthew 21: 23 27) is central to the Person and mission of Jesus Christ. Christ has this authority, but he will not impose it. He invites all to accept it, for our salvation depends on its acceptance.

That foremost religious mind of the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman, once wrote that religion is essentially a matter of authority and obedience. He did not mean to imply that a religion devoid of love was authentic religion, of course, but he was laying the stress on the recognition and acceptance of God's authority, which the Christian knows is present in the Person of Jesus Christ. We must accept the supreme authority of Christ and live our lives in obedience to him. Let us do this then, and let us by our witness manifest the lordship of Jesus Christ to the world.



Tuesday of the Third Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Zec 14: 5, 7 Behold, the Lord will come, and all his holy ones with him; and on that day there will be a great light.

Collect O God, who through your Only Begotten Son have made us a new creation, look kindly, we pray, on the handiwork of your mercy, and at your Son's coming cleanse us from every stain of the old way of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Zephaniah 3: 1-2,9-13; Ps. 34:2-3, 6-7, 17-18, 19, 23;
Matthew 21:28-32

Jesus said, What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted? The first, they answered. Jesus said to them, I

tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. (Matthew 21: 28-32)

Continual Repentance

One of the many obvious differences between Islam and Christianity is the denial by Islam of an inherited Original Sin. Islam believes that man is not born into an inherited condition of sin and separation from God. Further, by nature he is quite able to resist sin, and must do so. In the early Church, the priest Pelagius insisted that man by nature is able to live a good and holy life – and so he too denied the inherited fallen condition of man. Man can choose to live a holy life and can do this by force of his God-given nature. This doctrine was, as is well known, combated by St Augustine who insisted on the Fall and the power and the necessity of the free gift of grace. The Protestant Reformers following Luther and Calvin made this a central issue of their Reform, and, filled with a sense of the

helplessness of man before the call of holiness, insisted on the utter depravity of the human heart. It is God's sovereign power which is his only hope. Ever since these positions were nailed to the mast there has been hard controversy between the Catholic insistence that man's effort and choice also have a part to play and the Protestant insistence that faith alone avails. It is quite possible that there is no ultimate disagreement on this particular issue, despite the anathemas that arose as a result. Be all this as it may, it surely serves to introduce the great point of our Lord's parable in today's Gospel passage. His point is that we must *choose to convert*. There is the man who religiously promises to do God's will, but in the event does not. In both personal inclination and external appearance he is religious and there is often on his lips and in his heart the promise to God that he will do his will. He does not entertain the thought of a life of sin or of general neglect of God. He is, let us say, a religious man as most would understand that to be. But in the event, in his heart he chooses to displease God. Secretly he fails to follow God's law when it involves inconvenience. He gives very little indeed to the poor. In his heart of hearts all his life he refuses to

forgive. His imagination is cluttered with images that are offensive to God. That is to say, he chooses not to obey God, fails to convert, and consents to sin.

By contrast there is the person who for many years neglects God and everyone can see that. He does not live the faith he has received at his Baptism and in which he was raised by his dutiful parents. He hears that he must obey God to be saved and that Christ is the only Saviour, but he is interested in other things. This world is what he wants and to give his heart to Jesus Christ he regards as a waste and a mistake. So his life is godless and very secular. He does well in the world because worldly success is the focus of his life. But then he undergoes adverse experiences. He falls sick with a life threatening condition from which he recovers but in the process he has come to see the ephemeral character of purely worldly attainments. After all, what can he take with him when his time finally comes? At the end of his allotted span, what will he really have to show? Such are the thoughts that gradually come – thoughts that are perhaps confirmed by a bereavement. His

wife or child dies and he is absolutely devastated. What is it that makes life worthwhile? *And so he begins to change.* He gradually turns to God. Though his characteristic response to the call of faith and religion used to be "I will not," now it is very different. Now he says in his heart, "I will." He then goes from strength to strength in his new direction, still sinning but now continually converting. His conversion was not a one-off event, but the beginning of a pattern. He is continually endeavouring *to convert*. Every day he reviews briefly the course of his service of God during the day and he resolves yet again to change. He will change in the areas he sees require a change. His goal now is to repent constantly not only of serious sin but above all of venial sin, the smaller sins of every day. This, then, is the secret of the sanctity that is growing in him due to the action of grace. He does not consider any sin, even the lightest and most venial, to be acceptable. He knows that all sin is odious to God, so he will recognize it and resolve to avoid it. The secret to his spiritual progress is that he is repenting daily of deliberate venial sins.

Let us resolve to be like the first son in our Lord's parable who, though he refused to go to the vineyard as his father asked, *repented* and then went (Matthew 21: 28-32). This is what we should be doing not just once but every day of our lives. Though we fail to obey in this or that aspect of God's law, we must repent and then by the power of grace, resolve to do better. The more faithful to the grace of God we are, the more will grace be given to us. The secret to spiritual progress is ongoing repentance from venial sin. Let us repent then, repenting every day, all the while relying on the powerful grace of God.



Wednesday of the Third Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Heb 2: 3; 1 Cor 4: 5 The Lord will come and he will not delay. He will illumine what is hidden in darkness and reveal himself to all the nations.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that the coming solemnity of your Son may bestow healing upon us in this present life and bring us the rewards of life eternal. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 45: 6-8.21-25; Psalm 85: 9 & 10, 11-12, 13-14;
Luke 7:19-23

John sent two of his disciples to the Lord to ask, Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else? When the men came to Jesus, they said, John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?' At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits,

and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me. (Luke 7:19-23)

Christ is the Key Immediately after this passage of the Gospel we read how our Lord pronounced the highest praise for John. He is a true prophet "and something more, I tell you, than a prophet. This is the man of whom it is written, Behold, I am sending before thee that angel of mine who is to prepare thy way for thy coming". John is the fulfilment of this prophecy of Malachi (3:1). Our Lord emphasizes his point again: "I tell you, there is no greater than John the Baptist among all the sons of women" (Luke 7: 26-28). So then, Christ states that John was a *great* prophet. John had proclaimed that the Messiah was at hand and he had identified him as Jesus of Nazareth. He had summarized the essence of his Messianic mission, to take away the sin of the world

(John 1:29). The Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16), and he himself was unworthy to undo his sandal straps. When our Lord presented himself for baptism John had demurred: Jesus ought to be baptizing him, he said. He then witnessed a divine confirmation in the voice from heaven following Christ's baptism (Luke 3:22). But notice how our Gospel passage today suggests that John himself seemed to have had misapprehensions about the saving plan of God. Having pointed to Jesus and having passed the prophetic mantle on to him as to One far greater than himself, John from his prison cell was puzzled and troubled. Jesus did not seem to be acting as the Messiah. He did not seem to be purging the threshing floor clean and consuming the chaff with fire that can never be quenched (Luke 3:17). It looks as if John *imagined* the Messiah as a man of obvious might, exalting the good and putting down the wicked with a conquering flourish and invincible power. Of course, the Messiah would be all of this, but in the fullness of time at the end. His public ministry was other than what John expected. Rather, it was in accord with the real character of God who is a God rich in mercy and

compassion. What this means is that, in effect, John needed the teaching of Christ to interpret properly his own prophecy about him, which would have been based on earlier prophecies.

In response to the question of the two disciples of John as to whether in fact he was the Messiah, our Lord replied, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Luke 7: 19-23). Our Lord is pointing to the great prophecy of Isaiah, in which God is spoken of as coming to save his people. "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened," the prophet had written (Isaiah 35:5), "and the ears of the deaf shall be cleared. Then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the dumb shall be free." The two disciples of John would have returned to their master giving him full assurance and directing him as well to the prophecy which our Lord was fulfilling in its very detail. The point here, though, is that Christ is not only the fulfilment

of the Scriptures and the prophecies, but he is the light that enables the Scriptures to be understood. We have in John an example of a great prophet who not only prophesied the imminent arrival of the Messiah but who clarified his mission and identified his person. As with other great prophets, his teaching is incorporated into the inspired Scriptures – in his case, into the New Testament. However, our Gospel passage today shows that he too had to be enlightened *by Christ* as to the precise bearing of his own prediction. It is an instance of the principle that *Christ is the key* to the meaning of the Scriptures and the prophecies. The Person and teaching of Christ is foretold with varying degrees of clarity by the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms, but they themselves – as did John himself – receive clarifying light from the Person and teaching of Christ. Isaiah pointed to the Messiah, but the Messiah helps Isaiah, we might say, to understand his own prophecy. That is to say, we must use the Old Testament – and we may regard John as its epitome – to understand Christ all the more, and we must regard Christ as the light and the key in our reading of the Old Testament.

Jesus Christ is the treasure and the jewel of the world, and he is the heart and the soul of all the inspired writings. There is a marvellous unity to all of revelation and to all of its written expression in the Scriptures. That unity, that single thread which holds the entire structure together in one mighty and beautiful robe is the Person and teaching of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man. To have him and to live in his friendship by faith is the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in the field which we must sell everything to gain. As St Paul wrote, to live is Christ. Let us take our stand with him and live in his friendship, whatever be the cost.



Thursday of the Third Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 119 (118): 151-152 You, O Lord, are close, and all your ways are truth. From of old I have known of your decrees, for you are eternal.

Collect Unworthy servants that we are, O Lord, grieved by the guilt of our deeds, we pray that you may gladden us by the saving advent of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 54: 1-10; Psalm 30: 2 & 4, 5-6, 11-12a, & 13b;
Luke 7: 24-30

But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you, among those born of women there is no-one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. All the people, even the tax collectors, who heard him, acknowledged God's

plan as right by accepting John's baptism. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John. (Luke 7: 24-30)

Conversion At the end of our Gospel passage today our Lord tells us that "all the people, even the tax collectors" accepted baptism from John. Earlier in this same Gospel, St Luke tells us that "crowds" went out to be baptized by him (3:7). For his part, Matthew tells us that "there went out to him Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins" (3:5-6). St Luke tells us that John was blunt with the crowds that came to him: "O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (3:7). He was a prophet who preached fire and brimstone, we might say, and demanded that they repent. Our Lord informs us that the people accepted John's baptism. They responded to his call and their response was signified by their being baptized by him. But the "Pharisees and experts in the law" did not. Let us consider these two classes of persons, those who received John's

baptism, and those who did not, remembering that the foremost person who accepted John's baptism was Jesus Christ himself. Initially John would not baptize Jesus because of his profound sense of Christ's holiness. He knew Jesus had no sin, whereas – it is clear – he regarded himself as a sinner. He said that Jesus ought be the one baptizing him. By himself submitting to baptism, our Lord was bearing witness to the sin of the world and to its need to repent. Man must repent. Christ's first disciples had been trained by John: Simon and his brother Andrew, and James and John. Throughout his public ministry we see our Lord associating Peter, James and John in a special way with himself, and St Paul refers to these three as the pillars of the infant Church. They had come straight from the hand of John the Baptist. There is no doubt that the way had been prepared for our Lord by John, and the burst of missionary life in the Church after Pentecost had its roots in the prophetic ministry of John. The early Church constantly refers to his ministry. His preaching of repentance and his baptism asking God's forgiveness laid the foundation for the centrality of conversion in the Christian religion.

By contrast, our Lord tells us that the Pharisees and the lawyers did not accept the baptism of John. It seems that they held aloof. More than this, our Lord indicates in other passages of the Gospels that they positively rejected John. Coming down from the mountain after his transfiguration, our Lord told Peter, James and John – who had been disciples of John – that the leaders had treated John as they pleased. In the same chapter from which our Gospel today is drawn, our Lord tells us that John came neither eating nor drinking and they called him a devil. They were proud and unyielding before the preaching of John, despite the example of the common people who accepted him as a prophet and his baptism as God's will for them. This refusal set the pace for their confrontation with Jesus and refusal of him. The conflict grew in tempo and they became implacable. The more our Lord's holiness and power became manifest, the more resolute they became to destroy him. At root was their refusal to repent. The call to repent had come from John, and they refused. This call to repent was renewed with greater force by Christ, and they refused. Pilate saw that it was because of envy and jealousy that the leaders had handed Jesus over to

him. Their hearts hardened and became sunk in sin. Let us gaze upon these spiritual phenomena as illustrated by the two groups our Lord chooses to contrast. On the one hand there is the readiness to repent and on the other, the refusal to do so. Everything depends on the upshot of this choice, and we see it being played out in the public ministry and Passion of Christ. There Christ hangs on the cross and before him are the leaders of the Jews, jeering at him. They are the ones who refused to repent at John's preaching and again at Christ's preaching. Nearby stands a small group, among whom is John his beloved disciple and others of his disciples. They chose conversion and the following of him. Repentance is the door to life with Christ, while the refusal to repent is the door to death in sin.

Repentance is not just a one-off action. Conversion is not something we do on one day, or during some very significant moment, and that is all. Repentance is a daily feature of the life of the religious and Christian person. John's call to repent, a call renewed by Christ, is a call we must hear every day. It is only on the basis of continuing

repentance and turning away from sin that we can hope to follow Christ genuinely. Let us resolve to repent, to convert, and to do so every day.



Friday of the Third Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Behold, the Lord will come descending with splendour to visit his people with peace, and he will bestow on them eternal life.

Collect May your grace, almighty God, always go before us and follow after, so that we, who await with heartfelt desire the coming of your Only Begotten Son, may receive your help both now and in the life to come. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 56:1-3.6-8; Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 7-8; John 5:33-36

Jesus said to the Jews, You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. I have testimony weightier than that of

John. For the very works that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testify that the Father has sent me. (John 5: 33-36)

Witnesses to Jesus Christ Our brief Gospel passage today is part of a long discourse that makes up more than half of the chapter. The setting is the healing of the man who had been sick for nearly forty years and who lay near the pool of Bethesda. On the Sabbath day our Lord healed him at a word. The leaders of the Jews, we read in the chapter, pursued Jesus because in doing this he was, they insisted, breaking the Sabbath. Moreover, Christ "also said that God was his Father, making himself equal to God" (John 5:18). Christ's practice, his example and especially his unprecedented claims set the scene of this chapter and introduce our Lord's further claims and his defence. He states he is not alone in the witness he bears to himself, and in our passage today he begins with the witness borne to him by John the Baptist. To appreciate this we must notice the great status John has in the Gospel of St John. John is accorded a place in the very prologue of the Gospel. He is introduced in the sixth verse of the opening chapter,

immediately after the description of the Word of God who is the light and the life of man. We are informed of the Word who was with God, and immediately we are informed of John. John's prophetic testimony then takes up more than half of the first chapter of the Gospel and it is he who introduces the Messiah to the chosen people. The people recognized him as a prophet, and for its part the Gospel of St John acknowledges him to be a *very great* prophet. In our passage today our Lord points to his witness. He tells his hearers that he himself does not need human witnesses to be assured of his mission and his identity. He refers to John for the sake of his hearers: "I mention it that you may be saved." The leaders had sent to John, our Lord says, and "he has testified to the truth." We read of this testimony to the leaders in the first chapter of the Gospel when the Pharisees sent their representatives to ask John to account for himself. He told them plainly that the Messiah had arrived, and we can deduce that he made it publicly known that Jesus was the Messiah.

But our Lord says that he has a much greater witness than John, and that is his heavenly Father. The works he has been doing themselves show that the Father has sent him. We remember how on one occasion when he was teaching in a house, the press of people was so dense that those carrying a paralysed man could not get to Jesus. So they mounted the roof and lowered the sick man before Jesus from above. Seeing their faith our Lord said to the paralysed man, Your sins are forgiven you. The leaders who were watching were astonished that our Lord had presumed to forgive the man his sins. So our Lord said to them, To prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to you (the sick man) get up, take up your mat and go off home. This the man did in front of them all. Our Lord was unhesitatingly performing a great miracle precisely to show forth *the witness of the Father* to his authority to forgive sins. On a later occasion not long before his Passion, our Lord arrived at Bethany where his friend Lazarus had died some four days earlier. Just before he raised him from the dead at a word, he prayed to his heavenly Father, saying that what he was about to do would be done "that they may

believe that you have sent me" (John 11: 42). His raising of Lazarus was a work that showed *the witness of the Father* to his beloved Son. If we accept the historicity of the Gospels, then who else in human history could compare with Jesus Christ in his miraculous powers? If we accept the fact of a good and holy God, how could his miracles not be accounted as a divine witness to his unparalleled claims? Christ effortlessly performed miracles of an astounding variety and power, all directed to the relief of terrible human misery and the vindication of his claims. He cured lepers at a word. He restored sight to those blind from birth. He cured multitudes of a great range of debilitating illnesses. He even raised people from the dead and did so with absolute ease. He drove out demons. He calmed the sea at a word and walked on the turbulent waves, meeting his disciples at their boat in mid sea – showing who he was. To crown it all, he predicted that he would suffer and die, and that by his own power he would rise on the third day. This he did.

To a person thoroughly open to the truth, all that could have been done to vindicate the extraordinary claims of Jesus Christ was in fact done. The heavenly Father bore witness to him. On the Mountain, the voice of the Father was heard: this is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him! We cannot do better than listen to the voice of Jesus Christ and then to put what he says into practice. If we do this we shall be like the man who builds his house on rock. When the rain and the floods come, all will be well. Let us then plant ourselves next to Christ and never leave him.



Fourth Sunday of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 45: 8 Drop down dew from above, you heavens, and let the clouds rain down the Just One; let the earth be opened and bring forth a Saviour.

Collect Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Micah 5:1, 4a; Psalm 80: 2, 3, 15, 16, 18, 19;
Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

During those days Mary set out and travelled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and

blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." (Luke 1:39-45)

Mary One of the intriguing things about life is that great holiness and moral beauty can be – and usually is – present with a fairly ordinary exterior. Holiness seems to 'fit in.' It does not strive to be singular, in the sense of being unusual in general manner and appearance. One of the fascinating features of the life of Jesus Christ as reported in the Gospels is his thirty years of obscurity in Nazareth prior to his public ministry. When our Lord returned to his home town and spoke in the synagogue, the inhabitants of the town were amazed. Is not this the carpenter's son? they said. Are not his mother and relatives here with us? Where did the man get all this? Jesus of Nazareth had spent thirty years in a small village, and had grown in age, grace and wisdom. He undoubtedly commanded the respect of all for his human goodness and

maturity of life, but at the same time he 'fitted in' completely. In a word, his divine nature was veiled by his human nature to such a degree that, with the exception of his mother and foster father, his friends and relatives had no inkling of his divinity. Let this manifest fact about Christ introduce us to another similar fact – the seeming ordinariness of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Her true and unique grandeur was, in similar fashion, generally unrecognized, except in the case of a divine intervention as happened in our Gospel passage today. Mary's kinswoman Elizabeth recognized the unique blessedness of Mary because it was revealed to her by the Holy Spirit. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, we read, and she cried out in a loud voice, "most blessed are you among women." Mary was humble; she lived an ordinary and common life; her manner merged with that of her community; she shunned all singularity. Yet within all this her soul possessed an astounding degree of holiness, and was brimful of unique and singular graces. The Lord was with her and she had the entire favour of God. She was humble, lowly and withal full of the joy of

God, for he had looked on his lowly handmaid. So then, let us contemplate her, as did Elizabeth.

Mary is the masterwork of the mission of the Son of God and of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had prepared her, and the heavenly Father chose her to be the dwelling place where his Son could dwell among men. She had been thoroughly prepared from the first instant of her conception. From that point she had been full of grace. She was conceived completely free of sin in anticipation of the merits of her future Son and Redeemer. She was, by sheer grace, conceived without sin as the most humble of creatures, and as the one most capable of receiving the gift of the Almighty. The Lord was then with her, uninterruptedly preparing her as the abode of the eternal Word. Through the power of the Holy Spirit she conceived and would give birth to the Son of God. By the power of the Holy Spirit and her own faith, Mary's virginity became uniquely fruitful. She became like the Burning Bush of the book of Exodus, a bearer of God. Moreover, as our Gospel passage today shows so well (Luke 1:39-45), through her

the Holy Spirit brings men into communion with Christ. By going to her and being in her presence, we ourselves more easily meet Christ and enter into union with him. And the humble are the first to accept him: Elizabeth the kinswoman of Mary as in our Gospel today, the shepherds, the Magi, Simeon and Anna, and the first disciples years ahead. Just as Mary was lowly in spirit, so our Lord's true disciples are called to be humble of heart. The distinctive thing about Mary is that she is filled with the grace and the word of God. His grace and his word – the Holy Spirit and the Word made flesh – this is what Mary bears within her and this is why, when we meet Mary, we are brought into communion with God. So it is that, in our Gospel passage, when Elizabeth meets Mary her kinswoman, she is filled with the Holy Spirit, as is the unborn child within her. Mary is the heroine of the ages because she was utterly filled with God.

The insight of the entire Christian tradition is that the surest way to enter the company of Jesus is to take our stand by the mantle of Mary, for there by her mantle is her Child, the Son of God made

man. She knows him best, and she is best able to tell us about him and to introduce us to him. In this she is the mother and model of the Church, whose mission is to bring him to the nations and make disciples of all the peoples. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you! Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death. Mary is the help of Christians.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.721 726
(Mary! You are full of grace)

A Second Reflection: (Luke 1:39-45)

The Spirit of Christmas Today, being the last Sunday of Advent before Christmas Day, we are invited to enter into the spirit of this season in a way appropriate to what is coming. And how do we do that? Most of all by preparing together with Jesus and Mary. Let us look at how Mary prepares for Christmas, how Jesus himself prepares, and so how we should prepare. Consider Mary in our Gospel today

(Luke 1:39-45). As soon as the angel was gone, Mary hurries away to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was, Mary had been informed by the angel, already in her sixth month. Mary sped off on a three day journey to help. And when she comes, she comes to serve, and she brings Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and with them the Father. The child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy, and Elizabeth herself is inspired and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. She utters the words that have become part of the Hail Mary prayer: Blessed is the fruit of your womb. Let us resolve to be with Mary over the whole of the Christmas period, inviting her into our life as she comes to us as mother and model. She brings the gift of the Holy Spirit and a deeper relationship with her divine Son.

Let us consider Jesus. In the first reading we hear the words of Micah (Micah 5:1-4), a prophet who lived hundreds of years before Christ. He tells us that a Ruler will be born in David's town. He will be of ancient origin. In the light of the Gospel we surely see here a prophecy of the coming birth in David's town of the eternal Son of God. Imagine the eternal eagerness of God that his work finally is to

begin! And when God becomes man, as St Paul tells us in the second reading, he offers himself to the Father in obedience to his will: "O God, here I am! I am coming to obey your will." So eager is the Son of God to begin this work of saving obedience! As we think of Jesus, let us think of the great work of redemption which he came to do for us, and let us welcome that work and above all Jesus himself. Let us unite with him in his eagerness to do his work. So, thinking of Jesus and Mary as they prepared for Christmas, let us think of how we should prepare for Christmas. The second reading tells us that Jesus came into the world to do the will of the Father who loves us and wants our salvation. Jesus surrenders himself and his body to the will and the work of the Father. He was born in Bethlehem to pour out his blood on Calvary and to be our offering to God made present in the Mass now, and throughout the ages. Already the Cross is appearing on the horizon. It is always present. Let us remember this as we celebrate with joy the coming of the Redeemer. He came to shed his blood, to die on the cross for each of us and so to win for us the victory. Christ loved me, St Paul once wrote, and gave himself up for me. His coming

at Bethlehem showed the love of God for us, but it is especially on the Cross that this love is revealed.

Let us ask the Father to fill our hearts with love to follow Jesus through suffering and death to share in his resurrection and glory. Let us celebrate each Christmas in company with Jesus, Mary and Joseph, thinking of how they looked forward to the birth of the Messiah. Let us make Christmas a new moment in our friendship with Jesus, and together with that companionship with him, a more fervent association with him in his redemptive work. Let us enter into the spirit of Christmas and thus will it be a day and a season of true substance and of grace.

A Third Reflection: (Luke 1:39-45)

The True Christmas Gift As Christmas approaches we see that many are out buying Christmas presents. You may have heard the story about the father of many children who returned from his Christmas shopping, pulled his last five dollars from his pocket, and said, "I'm

going to give this \$5.00 as a present to the man who needs it most.” Then he put it straight back into *his own* pocket. Today's readings are all about our preparation for Christmas. Christmas is a celebration of God's gift giving, of the great gift He gave us, of how God gave us everything important in giving us his own Son. St Paul says that in Christ God gives us every heavenly blessing. Christians imitate God our Father by giving Christmas presents in celebration of the gifts He has given us. What Christmas should celebrate is God's gift of Jesus. The trouble is that so much of society has forgotten what Christmas is really about. The Gospel (Luke 1:39-45) presents us with the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Lady, our mother. Mary had just experienced the greatest event in human history, the Annunciation. The Messiah was coming, and she was his mother. She would have had every reason to withdraw into seclusion and to guard in safety the Child conceived within her. But what did she do? She went immediately to serve her cousin who needed help, a three day journey to a town in Judea, and she was not just bringing her own human service. She bore within her the Saviour. The child in Elizabeth's

womb leaped for joy, and Elizabeth herself was filled with the Holy Spirit. As we contemplate this scene we are reminded that wherever we are, wherever we go, whatever we do, whatever way we serve others in our family or work or whatever, we should be bringing Christ with us. In this Mary is our model. This we do by our love and service of Christ who abides within us by grace, and who identifies with the least of our neighbours. In serving others we serve Christ. Let us prepare for Christmas in the way our Lady did, by renewing in ourselves a Christlike concern for people, and by living more deeply our union with Christ as we bring him to those whom we are serving.

While we look to Mary who can teach us so much, even more do we look to the Person of Christ himself, the One who is the heart and soul of Christmas. In the second reading (Hebrews 10: 5-10), we are told why Jesus came into the world. It was to do the will of the Father who loves us and intends our salvation. So Jesus gives the Father the gift of his obedience, and surrenders his body – his entire humanity – to God for the work of our redemption. He was born at Bethlehem for one

great purpose, to pour out his blood for us on Calvary. This great sacrifice for our sake is made present for our benefit every time Mass is celebrated. In fact, our Lord was born in order that Mass and Holy Communion, which is Calvary made present to us, might be possible. So the second reading reminds us of what Christ's birth, the first Christmas, pointed to. It pointed to his great sacrifice of himself on Calvary, and beyond Calvary to the celebration of Mass. Mass is the greatest means God has provided us of uniting with Jesus in his Sacrifice at Calvary, which redeemed the world. So we are led to think of the invitation we all have of being united to Jesus not only in his joys, but in his sufferings. This is the test of a Christian. The truest test of our Christian life is whether we choose to take up our cross and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. This too, we are reminded of today as we read the second reading. Let us prepare for Christmas in the way our Lord did, by offering to do God's will and carry our cross with Jesus. In this spirit we ought endeavour to make of Christmas a truly religious feast. It is so easy for it to degenerate into something rather secular, something even an atheist or agnostic would happily

celebrate. Its celebration ought be the occasion of grace, a renewal in our Christlike service of others, a service bringing Christ to them. It should also be a renewal of our intention to follow Christ closely, which is to say our intention to do God's will generously, carrying our cross after Jesus our Lord. The shadow of the cross hung over the Child of Bethlehem. If at this point we have a great cross or some anxiety, then we ought use Christmas to entrust it to Jesus, asking him to use it as he used his own cross for the salvation of the world.

This is the joy of Christmas, that a Saviour has been born to us, Christ the Lord. He, our Saviour, redeemed us by his blood. The sorrows of this world now have a new meaning and value because of Christ our Lord. Christ is the gift of the Father to the world. Let us make this gift the object of our celebration at Christmas.



The Seventeenth Day of December

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 49: 13 Rejoice, O heavens, and exult, O earth, for our Lord will come to show mercy to his poor.

Collect O God, Creator and Redeemer of human nature, who willed that your Word should take flesh in an ever-virgin womb, look with favour on our prayers, that your Only Begotten Son, having taken to himself our humanity, may be pleased to grant us a share in his divinity. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 49:2.8-10; Psalm 72:1-2, 3-4ab, 7-8, 17;
Matthew 1:1-17

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab

the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife, Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, Abiud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Eliud, Eliud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. Thus there were fourteen generations in all from

Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ. (Matthew 1:1-17)

God Writes Straight

One gets the impression that over the past half century there has been an explosion of grassroots interest in genealogy. That is to say, a very great number of people have been investigating with thoroughness their ancestries. Genealogical associations have sprung up and there is a lot of help available even on the Internet. This, I think, is warmly encouraged by professional historians because they recognize the immense contribution to the knowledge of the past that it represents. For the person who is convinced of the presence and action of God in history, the study of ancestry can also deepen one's sense of Providence. He delves into the hidden history of his forebears and sees their ordinariness, their strengths and their failures. He senses the sweep of the generations as they pass on from birth to death and then on to the next, with their achievements and their losses. He gains a certain fascination with what might be called the grandeur of history as it has touched his own family

line. He might even gain a sense of God's choice of him, of God's gift of life to him with the opportunities that life will bring. History is not just a jumble, nor the plaything of the powerful and the ruthless, nor merely the contest between personal hopes and external forces. It is also the arena of the action of the hidden God caring for his children. Any study of history is valuable if it issues in a sense of the Lord of history and of how God writes straight even if in crooked lines. Now, this is surely a principal teaching of the Sacred Scriptures. The Inspired Writings present the history of a people with all their faults, failures and successes. But the notable thing about this history is the presence and action of God caring for his chosen ones. Today's Gospel (Matthew 1: 1-17), at the start of the Octave leading to Christmas, presents the ancestry of Jesus Christ. It encapsulates the story of God's chosen people and the saving action of God within it. Beginning with the call of Abraham, St Matthew shows how God writes straight in very crooked lines. The shining crown and meaning of the story is Mary and Joseph, and the birth of the Messiah.

Let us notice the zig-zag in Christ's ancestry. Apart from Abraham and David, many of the persons mentioned are virtually unknown, yet their glory is to have been an ancestor of Christ. There are those in the list who are far from having moral splendour, indeed there are some who brought the story to a low point. Yet God drew from them the most splendid moral Exemplar – Jesus Christ. Ruth, the great grandmother of King David, had been a pagan. We notice that St Matthew has structured the genealogy in three groups of fourteen ancestors. It is very symmetrical and suggests that in all the ups and downs of history, God was writing straight. He had his plan and it was most surely fulfilled. All was in his hand, and the sins and infidelities that beset his chosen people could not prevent God from attaining his saving purposes and fulfilling his promises. It is in this that history has its greatest grandeur. Despite appearances, God is very near and he is working to save his people from their sins. On one occasion when our Lord was attacked for healing on the Sabbath, he replied that his Father was working, so he worked too. The answer implies that God is ever working to attain his plan for our salvation. Just as the prophets trusted

that God would fulfil his promises, so should we. We remember Simeon and Anna in the Temple when Mary and Joseph came to present the child Jesus to God there. Simeon had been yearning to see the Messiah and was granted his wish. He lived to see God fulfil his promises. We are also reminded by Christ's genealogy of how God fulfilled his promise far beyond expectation. The Messiah was far more than the prophecies had suggested. Here was God himself become man! It was a revelation beyond all expectation. There now walked upon the earth the living God. He had become a real, true man. As man he took up the baton of man's salvation and ran with it to win the race. He ran, and empowered us to run with him. It is an uphill run, and the peak of the run is the door of heaven itself. At the climax of our individual run, which is the moment of our death, he comes to us to take us with him to glory.

Let us read our Gospel today with the thought of our very human, our very ordinary, our very sinful condition in mind. History is a broken thing, but within it is a wondrous diamond. That sparkling

treasure is the living God caring for his helpless people. More still – he has become one of us and abides with us in his body the Church, sharing with us his life. In the difficult path of human history we have hold of a great stay – that stay is Jesus Christ our brother and Saviour. This is the great fact of human history, and it is powerfully suggested in today's Gospel.



The Eighteenth Day of December

Entrance Antiphon Christ our King is coming, he is the Lamb foretold by John.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who are weighed down from of old by slavery beneath the yoke of sin, may be set free by the newness of the long-awaited Nativity of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 23:5-8; Psalm 72:1-2, 12-13, 18-19;
Matthew 1:18-24

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and

said, Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel - which means, God with us. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. (Matthew 1:18-24)

The Saviour This is a precious passage because in it Matthew reports what God revealed to Joseph about Jesus after his conception and prior to his birth. We must assume that the ultimate source of this information was the Virgin Mary, who, of course, would have been told it by Joseph himself. The setting is Joseph's great perplexity as to the course to follow, having discovered his betrothed to be already with child. He was a most saintly man, and he could have had no doubt as to the sanctity of Mary his betrothed. But what was to be made of her

pregnancy? The only course that occurred to him was quietly to bring the betrothal to an end in a way that would avoid all obvious embarrassment to her. This plan forming in his mind, suddenly an angel of the Lord spoke to him in a dream informing him of the true situation. Inasmuch as it is Gabriel who spoke to both Mary and Zechariah in the Gospel of St Luke, we may presume it is Gabriel who speaks to Joseph in the Gospel of St Matthew. Joseph is addressed by the angel as "Joseph son of David" and he is the one who is to name the unborn child. That is to say, Joseph by the plan of God is here given the mission to act and serve as his father, and thus the child too will be the son of David. This child is the gift of God, for it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that he has been conceived of the Virgin. In this striking fashion, the child is shown as having been sent from God – not, say, at the moment of a prophetic call, but from the first instant of his conception. Notably, Joseph is informed of the name he is to confer on the child and he is informed of the child's mission. The child is to be named "Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now, there are a few things to be noticed about this annunciation of the

mission of the child. Let us observe that in Luke's account of the annunciation to the Virgin Mary by the angel Gabriel, it is made abundantly clear that it is the Messiah who will be born of her and that the Messiah will be none other than the Son of God. His kingdom will be eternal. No doubt Mary immediately divined that the child's messianic mission would be to redeem his people from their sins, but this is not specifically stated by the angel. It is formally stated, though, in the angel's words to Joseph. It is as if a further revelation is being given as to the precise focus of the child's messianic work, and what the angel said to each would have been shared one with the other. Joseph is to name the child Jesus (meaning, God saves) because he is to save his people from their sins. Now, notice something further. The saviours of the past (Moses, the judges such as Samson, David, certain valiant leaders such as the Maccabees) saved their people from, we might say, the sins of their enemies. Moses saved his people – at God's direction – from the Pharaoh, and led them to the promised land. Samson saved his people from the surrounding enemies, and the Maccabees saved their people from godless oppression. The Messiah was expected to save his

people from all such oppression and give to his people an enduring and absolute peace. The angel reveals to Joseph that this messianic child will save his people from *their* sins. It is from the bind and the thrall of sin which the Messiah was coming to set his people free. It was *primarily* from their *own* sins that he was going to liberate them, and not simply from the sins and oppression of their enemies. He was not coming to lead a political liberation but a spiritual one, one directed at the heart of each member of "his people". The true oppression was coming from within the heart and soul of each of his own, and this liberation from sin was to be his mission – a liberation to be brought to all who chose to count themselves among "his people". There is perhaps here not only the clear indication of the proper mission of the Messiah, but a hint as to the "people" of the Messiah. They are those who receive the redemption from sin that he would bring. Joseph was being told before the birth of the child what John the Baptist would announce publicly decades later: Here is he who takes away the sin of the *world*.

Let us take our stand with the humble yet valiant Joseph and listen with him to what the angel says of the child soon to be born. Jesus is the One who saves "his people," and the redemption he will bring is the redemption "from their sins." So, two things matter. Firstly we must acknowledge, accept and love our Saviour. Secondly, we must recognize and renounce the sins from which he, our Saviour, has liberated us. Let us then renew the promises of our baptism and renounce sin, professing all the while our faith in Christ our Lord, our Saviour and our God.



The Nineteenth Day of December

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Heb 10: 37 He who is to come will come and will not delay, and now there will be no fear within our land, for he is our Saviour.

Collect O God, who through the child-bearing of the holy Virgin graciously revealed the radiance of your glory to the world, grant, we pray, that we may venerate with integrity of faith the mystery of so wondrous an Incarnation and always celebrate it with due reverence. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Judges 13:2-7, 24-25a; Psalm 71:3-4a, 5 6ab, 16-17;
 Luke 1:5-25

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of

God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. And they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well on in years. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom

of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Zechariah asked the angel, How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years. The angel answered, I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time. Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. The Lord has done this for me, she said. In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people. (Luke 1: 5-25)

The grandeur of the Ordinary

If we turn to the Gospel of St John, as soon as the eternal Word of God is introduced in the Prologue

(1:1-5), so is John the Baptist (1: 6-8), and much of the first chapter is given over to his ministry. Our Gospel today is from St Luke. Having introduced his Gospel to the reader (1: 1-4), St Luke immediately brings forward the figure of St John the Baptist. A lengthy portion of his first chapter is devoted to his conception and birth. In our Gospel today we are told how the Angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah the birth of his great son. But let us notice a detail explicitly mentioned by the Angel that is often overlooked. It is the role of Zechariah's *prayer* prior to the appearance of the Angel. We read that "an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: Do not be afraid, Zechariah; *your prayer has been heard*. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John." Of course, the person and ministry of John was part and parcel of the preordained plan of God – indeed, our Lord said that he was the Elijah who would come again, and the fulfilment of the prophecy of Malachi. Nevertheless, the prayer of Elizabeth and Zechariah was an important part of the implementation of that divine

plan. The Angel implies that the birth of John was in response to *Zechariah's prayer*: "Zechariah, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son." It seems that the holy couple had been long praying for this favour, even despite their advanced years. They were excellent instances of Old Testament religion. St Luke tells us that "Both of them were upright (*dikaioi* - righteous, just) in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly." The word "upright" is the same as that used of St Joseph the husband of the virgin Mary (*dikaioi* - Matt 1:19). Yet despite their blameless life they had a lifelong sorrow: they had no child, despite their prayers for offspring. But they remained faithful to God and, it seems, continued with their prayer. As it turns out, their prayer and their fidelity were essential elements in the fulfilment of the saving plan of God.

Let our minds turn back to another great prophet of the Old Testament, Samuel. We read at the beginning of the first book of Samuel that Hannah remained year after year without child and was

profoundly grieved. In her heartfelt prayer she prayed for a male child, and her prayer is given in the first chapter. The Lord answered her prayer and she conceived, and gave birth to one who was great before the Lord. Samuel her son "grew up and the Lord was with him, not permitting any word of his to be without effect. Thus all Israel from Dan to Beersheba came to know that Samuel was an accredited prophet of the Lord" (1 Samuel 3:19-20). Hannah's prayer, the prayer of one who was truly devoted to the Lord, had an important place in the implementation of the saving plan of God. Samuel was the greatest of Israel's judges, and he anointed first Saul, and then David to be king. David, in turn, was the ancestor of the Messiah and a type of him. This turn in salvation history may be said to have pivoted on the prayer of Hannah. So too, in a sense, the life and ministry of the John the Forerunner pivoted on the prayer of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Their prayer was heard and John began his existence. It is an indication that in the plan of God much depends on seeming little things, such as the persistent prayer for a particular favour, offered up by those who truly love God in obedience. Another seemingly *little* thing that was so

crucial in salvation history was the *consent* given to the Angel soon after the event narrated in today's Gospel. I refer to the consent of the Virgin Mary to the announcement by the Angel that in God's plan she was to be the mother of the Messiah. "Be it done to me according to your word," the Virgin replied. That simple reply, expressing such incomparable and never-failing obedience, was an essential pin that enabled the divine plan to proceed. Our Gospel today (Luke 1: 5-25) presents us with an otherwise obscure couple from among the chosen people, humbly living lives of obedience to God. As is revealed in the words of the angel, their prayer was very important indeed. Let that be a reminder of the importance of all the little things that make up the ordinary life. All have their dignity, all have their place in God's plan.

Let us be filled with a sense of the gift of life and all that it has brought, with all its needs, its disappointments, its sorrows and its joys. In whatever situation we find ourselves, let us turn that situation into an occasion whereby God is honoured and glorified. Every need we have has its importance. Every prayer we pray has its

importance. All our sufferings can be turned to God's use. Let the example of Elizabeth and Zechariah remind us again of the grandeur of the ordinary life, made up as it is of ordinary things.



The Twentieth Day of December

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 11: 1; 40: 5; Lk 3: 6 A branch shall sprout from the root of Jesse, and the glory of the Lord will fill the whole earth, and all flesh will see the salvation of God.

Collect O God, eternal majesty, whose ineffable Word the immaculate Virgin received through the message of an Angel and so became the dwelling-place of divinity, filled with the light of the Holy Spirit, grant, we pray, that by her example we may in humility hold fast to your will. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24:1-2, 3-4ab, 5-6;
 Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with

you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end. How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin? The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May it be to me as you have said. Then the angel left her. (Luke 1: 26-38)

The Annunciation

If we search the Old Testament, I do not think we shall find a greeting from God equal to the one expressed by the

Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. In the Book of Genesis, the first direct communication from God to man (Adam) is the granting of a permission and the giving of a command: "You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat. The moment you eat from it you shall certainly die" (2:16-17). God's first words to Abraham consist of a command: "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and your father's house to a land I will show you" (Gen 12:1). God's first words to Moses are a warning and a command: "Moses! Moses! Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet ... I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people.." (Exodus 3: 4-10). God's first words to Samuel (1 Samuel 3: 11-14) were a judgment against Eli and his family. The first words of God to Elijah as reported in the first book of Kings are a command: "Leave here, go east and hide in the Wadi Cherith.." (17:3). God's first words to the prophet Isaiah were a command to cleanse his sins and to go to the people as his representative (Isaiah 6: 6-9). But observe the greeting expressed by the exalted emissary from God to the humble and obscure Virgin Mary:

"Greetings, you who are filled with God's favour! The Lord is with you." I do not think there is anything its equal in the history of God's people. The great Angel, Gabriel, representing God as he does, speaks in respectful and laudatory terms to Virgin. Before the Angel there stands one who is singularly endowed by grace, one with whom God is present in every way and in an absolute, unqualified sense. This is the Lady of God's chosen people, the one who is about to become the new Eve, the mother of all the living. God did not address the first Eve as he does the second. Let us then stand with the Angel and share in his veneration for this singular creature, pure in her holiness beyond description, who gazes upon him in humble wonderment. Hail, Mary, you who are full of grace!

The Angel does not command, but announces the will of the Lord, and in doing so asks the Virgin's consent. But hearken now to his message. It is the will of the Lord that she here and now be with child, and this child will be none other than the Messiah himself. One wonders if, at the very moment the Angel arrived, Mary was reading a

scroll of a Messianic prophecy. Perhaps she was praying and yearning for the Messiah who was to come, as did Simeon whom she would see and hear before the coming year was out. In any case, the Angel now tells her the wondrous news. Her child would be the Messiah himself. How great a child! "You are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1: 26-38). These words must have burned themselves indelibly on the profoundly impressionable mind of Mary, who then treasured them in her heart for the rest of her life. Reported in Luke, these words have her for their ultimate source. Her child was the King of kings, and he would sit on David's throne forever, and his kingdom would never end. Moreover, he is the very Son of the Most High. How, she humbly asked, could this happen now, for I am a virgin? The Spirit of God will come upon you, the angel explained, and the divine power will cover you. Thus you will become the mother of the Son of God. For nothing is impossible to God! The holy maiden's reply is simple, yet it

expresses the most profound obedience ever lived by any creature of God: "I am the servant of the Lord. May it be to me as you have said." Her consent obtained, the angel left her. The Son of God had become man, the new Adam. The virgin had become the new Eve, mother of all the living. The greatest miracle here is not that of the virgin birth, but that of the Incarnation. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Son of God was made flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. God's definitive revelation of himself to man as a trinity of Persons had formally begun, as had the mystery of the Incarnation.

This revelation was heard, received and accepted in total faith by the Daughter of Sion, the Lady of our race, our mother, the first and foremost Christian, the mother of the Church and the most perfect human image of her divine Son. Let us ask her intercession before God, that we too receive in obedient faith all that God has revealed of his plan for our salvation. Let us receive it as did she, in full faith and obedience. This obedience would lead her to the foot of the cross. It will lead us there too.

The Twenty-first Day of December

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 7: 14; 8: 10 The Lord and Ruler will be coming soon, and his name will called be Emmanuel, because he will be called God-with-us.

Collect Hear in kindness, O Lord, the prayers of your people, that those who rejoice at the coming of your Only Begotten Son in our flesh may, when at last he comes in glory, gain the reward of eternal life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Song of Songs 2:8-14 or Zephaniah 3:14-18;
 Psalm 33: 2-3, 11-12, 20-21; Luke 1:39-45

At that time Mary rose up and went in haste to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit

of your womb! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished! (Luke 1:39-45)

Mary in the Christian Religion

One of the most intriguing, to say the least, of the features of the Protestant Reformation was its denigration of devotion to the Virgin Mary. This was something new in Christian practice and thought. In neither the East nor the West had this been done before, so systematically and formally. Rather, in common with almost all other features of Christian thought and practice, there had been a gradual development in the Church's understanding of what God had implicitly revealed of the mother of Jesus Christ. With this growing perception there had been a corresponding growth in appreciation and devotion. The Reformers regarded such developments as corruptions. But as John Henry Newman would point out in his landmark book, *The Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845),

doctrine – understood as the Church's formal understanding, teaching and expression of revelation – *develops* in the Church (though it may in some bodies corrupt). Doctrine should be expected to grow and deepen, as would any idea over time. The distinctive thing about the development of Christian doctrine is that the Church's dogmatic formulation of this development is guided by the Holy Spirit. It does not merely change over time in response to random historical forces. Of course, the Reformers were reacting against many *popular* abuses in which the centrality of Christ himself was obscured. Mary and the saints occupied centre stage in the religious imagination of many who lacked adequate catechesis. Many in effect had forgotten the teaching of Scripture, Tradition and the Church that Christ is our high priest and mediator, ever interceding for us at the right hand of the Father. But in reacting as they did to this popular distortion, the Reformers in their turn forgot that the whole Church by divine appointment shares in Christ's high priestly mediation, especially those who are most deeply in union with Jesus. All the faithful are members of Christ's body which is the Church, and as such they share in his

saving work and in his intercession. This is pre-eminently the case with the sinless Virgin Mary. In union with him she is our model of discipleship, and in union with him she intercedes for us. In Christ she is our mother and our model, and as Christ loved and honoured her, so should we.

In our Gospel today (Luke 1:39-45), we have a strong expression of this profoundly Christian sentiment in respect to the Virgin Mary, and undoubtedly the inspired author meant it to be understood as such. Mary, having obediently assented to the divine plan that she be the mother of the Redeemer, hastens to the hill country of Judea to assist her kinswoman Elizabeth who herself is likewise a protagonist of the plan of redemption. Mary arrives, virgin mother of the Lord, and upon her arrival the Holy Spirit comes upon Elizabeth and upon the child she is bearing. Mary bears the Redeemer within her, and the Redeemer's Gift of the Holy Spirit is given – and we remember that just as the Son of God here gave the sanctifying gift of the Holy Spirit to the unborn John, so he bestowed the same Gift on Mary at her

own *conception*. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and she cries out with a loud voice in praise of the virgin Mary. Notice that! The Holy Spirit himself prompts Elizabeth to cry out in a loud voice – a loud voice! – in praise and honour of Mary the mother of Christ. It is a pointer to what the Holy Spirit will prompt the Church to do down through the ages, with mounting crescendo. The Church will sing from generation to generation the praises of the virgin Mary and will declare itself honoured to be visited by the mother of the Lord. In a loud voice – a loud voice! – Elizabeth exclaims, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!*" The authentic thought, teaching and practice of the Church never separates Mary from her divine Child: Blessed are you, Mary, and blessed is the Child you bore. True devotion to Mary never obscures Christ. Mary helps the Christian know and love him. Elizabeth, standing for all God's people, herself a grand representative of the holiness of the Old Testament and positioned at the dawn of the New, professes to be deeply honoured and favoured by the coming of Mary to her. She welcomes her with exultation and her child, the Forerunner, leaps with joy. Of course, both

Elizabeth and her unborn child are welcoming first and foremost the Christ child whom Mary is bringing with her, but honour rendered to Mary is inseparable from this. Blessed are you among women, Elizabeth declares, blessed are you! This has been the cry of Christ's faithful ever since.

As we approach Christmas, let us be profoundly imbued with what is so evidently the teaching of Scripture, the singular place in Christ which Mary occupies in the Christian life. Our Gospel scene today (Luke 1:39-45) giving the words of Elizabeth is a template of the attitude of the Church and her members to the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ the Son of the living God. She is the blessed one, blessed among women – above all for her faith, but also for her singular calling as mother of the Lord. Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Let us pray those very Scriptural words every day of our life.

The Twenty-second Day of December

Entrance Antiphon Psalm 24 (23): 7 O gates, lift high your heads;
grow higher, ancient doors. Let him enter, the king of glory!

Collect O God, who, seeing the human race fallen into death, willed to redeem it by the coming of your Only Begotten Son, grant, we pray, that those who confess his Incarnation with humble fervour may merit his company as their Redeemer. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 1:24-28; 1 Samuel 2:1, 4-5, 6-7;
Luke 1:46-56

And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has

scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. (Luke 1:46-56)

Mighty God, and Mary his Servant

Throughout the Old

Testament the great works of God are extolled and his chosen servants are held up for veneration. Before Abraham, Noah was "a good and blameless man in that age, for he walked with God." He is set apart by God and preserved from the flood that sweeps away in judgment the sinners that cover the earth. A new covenant is established, but the sorry pattern of sin continues unabated, symbolized by the pride of the Tower of Babel. Abraham is called by God and is promised the divine blessing. He "went as the Lord directed" and proved his obedience and his faith. Following Abraham there are the Patriarchs, Moses, certain of

the Judges such as Samson and Samuel, and Kings such as David and Hezekiah, the prophets such as Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and certain of the priests. They stand as examples for God's chosen people, solemnly illustrating the supreme place God occupies in life, bearing witness to what he has done and will do. It is against this broad backdrop that we ought reflect on the words of joy uttered by the virgin Mary in today's Gospel passage (Luke 1:46-56). She extols God and because of him she will be counted as blessed. She thinks of the story of God's care for his people from generation to generation. He, God, is great. Her "soul" – the core of her entire self – proclaims his greatness (Greek: *mega lunei*) and her "spirit" exults in him who saves her. God is her Saviour. If we set the inspired literature of the Hebrews against the literature of the ancient world, the two things which Mary extols in God are those which mark *Yahweh* off from the other gods of the peoples. He is great and he saves. No other deity compares in greatness with *Yahweh*. All others in their own way compete for power with other gods. Zeus and Jupiter are not unrivalled. They are restricted by the other gods of the pantheon. But *Yahweh* is simply

great, great beyond compare – and he saves. He is, as Mary humbly sings, the Mighty One who saves.

In her prayer Mary thinks of the history of God's dealings with his people. *"He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts."* We think of *Yahweh* sending Moses to Pharaoh to take his people out of slavery to the promised land. Pharaoh was proud of heart – indeed, the Scriptural icon of those who are proud before *Yahweh* – but he was scattered by the plagues and wonders with which Egypt was visited at the word of Moses. *"He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble."* We think of Sennacherib who advanced against Hezekiah and Jerusalem, pouring scorn on the God of Hezekiah and Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah predicted that the city would not be touched and that God would send Sennacherib packing. *"That night the angel of the Lord went forth and struck down one hundred and eighty five thousand men in the Assyrian camp... So Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, broke camp, and went back home to Nineveh"* (2 Kings 19: 35-

36). We think of the writing on the wall during the banquet of King Belshazzar, and Daniel's solemn interpretation of it – so powerful an event that the expression, "the writing on the wall", is now a synonym for a destruction that is certain to come. *"He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers."* In all of this the Virgin Mary is exulting in the Mighty One who saves. He shows his might in his saving mercy, rescuing and raising up those who are oppressed and suffering. *"His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation."* And Mary herself will be counted blessed for all generations – so she is the greatest instance of the power and the mercy of God. Her greatness, her blessedness, her shining and matchless height among God's creatures is his merciful gift to one who is but his lowly servant. Mary the humble and lowly one, Mary the blessed one, blessed beyond compare and for all generations to come!

Let us read this precious passage of the Gospel which sums up so deftly the entire meaning of the Old Testament and its revelation of

God and his saving ways. We could not do better than read the Scriptures with Mary's words as their key constantly in mind. With her let us praise the might and mercy of God and count her as the blessed one for all generations. God is great. He is merciful. He saves. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death!



The Twenty-third Day of December

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 9: 5; Ps 72 (71): 17 A child shall be born for us, and he will be called God, the Almighty; every tribe of the earth shall be blest in him.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, as we see how the Nativity of your Son according to the flesh draws near, we pray that to us, your unworthy servants, mercy may flow from your Word, who chose to become flesh of the Virgin Mary and establish among us his dwelling, Jesus Christ our Lord. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Psalm 25:4-5ab, 8-10 and 14;
 Luke 1:57-66

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father

Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, No! He is to be called John. They said to her, There is no one among your relatives who has that name. Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, His name is John. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbours were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, What then is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand was with him. (Luke 1:57-66)

The Hand of The Lord

In their Gospels, St Mark and St John begin with the inauguration of the public ministry of our Lord and his prophetic sanction by John the Baptist. The first two chapters of St Luke's Gospel provide, we might say, the backdrop for this entry of Christ into the public sphere. The circumstances of the birth of both Christ and John are described in detail and some details are given of

their youth. It is a providential harbinger of what is to come. Our Gospel today is of a piece with this, and it is made clear that from the first, John was chosen as a prophet of the Most High. Abraham was called at the time of his manhood, as was Moses. Samuel was called as a child, and David as a youth. St Luke is at pains to show that the hand of the Lord was with John from before his birth. It was evident to those close to the family that God had marked this child with special favour, and, they began to surmise, with a special mission. Signs had been given of this special marking – Zechariah had returned home from Temple service, now dumb. The parents, beyond childbearing, now had a son. Inexplicably, they separately wanted their child called by a name unprecedented in the family. And lo! At the very point of Zechariah's announcement of the child's name, he begins to speak, and he praises God. The attention of all is drawn to the newborn child. God is pointing to him as one whom he has chosen – but for what? What will this child be? What is he to do? It is clear to the circle of friends and relatives that there is here a child of destiny, and the wonderment gradually spreads "*throughout the hill country of Judea*". Perhaps a

rumour spread more widely and people remembered. "*All who heard about this wondered.*" The child grew, and became strong in spirit. We are simply told that "*he lived in the desert until the day when he made his appearance in Israel.*" It seems that he left his family home and village – perhaps when his elderly parents died – and lived "*in the wilderness.*" Some have thought he may have joined the Essenes. We do not know. But from the first, God was forming the child for his work.

One of the distinctive features of a genuine religious faith is belief in a *particular* providence. That is to say, an indicator that a person's belief in God is real is the belief that he is caring for *me*, me! – and not just for the world or for people in general. It is generally accepted that the prevailing (religious) English philosophical position of the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century was what has been called Deism. At times Deism is understood to mean that God was regarded as beginning the world, but as rarely if ever involved in its processes once he established its laws. It would be more correct to say

that Deism held that belief in a Creator (and religious truth in general) can be determined using reason and observation of the natural world alone, without a need for either faith or organized religion. It tended to assert that God (or "The Supreme Architect") has a plan for the universe that is *not altered* either by his intervening in the affairs of human life or by suspending the natural laws of the universe. Revealed religion was discounted and one result was a loss of a sense that God is caring in a special way *for me*. The course of my life and the circumstances that shape it tended to be seen as simply the upshot of the laws of the world – all of which, of course, were admitted to be in the hands of God. But what was said of John in our Gospel passage today is not what the deist would think is in any way typical: namely, that the hand of the Lord was *upon him*. But the fact is that this indeed *is* typical: the hand of the Lord is upon each of us. This is not expressed in miraculous circumstances as it was in the case of John and Christ in the first chapter of St Luke, but it is the case nevertheless. The hand of the Lord is upon each of us in all the ordinary circumstances of everyday life. And in fact, even in the life of John, Mary, Joseph and Christ

himself, the hand of the Lord was upon them precisely in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life. Miraculous circumstances were uncommon. The ordinary life was the norm – and it was in this arena that the hand of the Lord was upon them.

In all the difficulties of life, in all the sadness and frustration and the joys, let us learn to see the hand of the Lord upon us. The saints were able to see that, in both the good times and the bad, God was caring for them. As St Paul writes in one of his Letters, all things come together for the good of those who love God. God's providence is very particular – his care for us is particular to each of us. It is not just a care for the human race in general. God loves me! As St Paul writes, Christ loved me and gave himself up *for me*. The hand of the Lord is truly upon each of us.



The Twenty-fourth Day of December

The Morning Mass

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Gal 4: 4 Behold, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son into the world.

Collect Come quickly, we pray, Lord Jesus, and do not delay, that those who trust in your compassion may find solace and relief in your coming. Who live and reign with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture Today: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16; Ps 89:2-3, 4-5, 27, 29
Luke 1:67-79.

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us

to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. (Luke 1: 67-79)

Zechariah's Prophecy

Every Sunday, following the readings from Scripture and the homily, we proclaim together the Creed – the Nicene Creed or the Apostles Creed. During that Creed we profess our faith in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life who proceeds from the Father and the Son. We state that he has spoken through the prophets. In the New Testament also the Holy Spirit is shown as speaking through the prophets – the prophet *par excellence*, the Prophet

long predicted, being Christ himself. The Holy Spirit spoke through the reaction of John the Baptist. He spoke through Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, the parents of John. At Mary's visit to Elizabeth (Luke 1: 41-42) we read that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and in a loud voice spoke of Mary and the child in her womb. In our Gospel today (Luke 1: 67-79), it is her husband Zechariah who is filled with the Holy Spirit and who prophesies. Let us consider his inspired words, for they speak of God. He proclaims: All praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel! *He has come to his people to redeem them.* This, I would propose, is one of the distinctive features of Yahweh among the high gods of mankind's religions. Yahweh does not simply remain in the heights and leave contacts with those below to lesser deities and spirits. He himself *comes to his chosen people.* He redeems them from their enemies and from the hand of all who hate them. He comes to show mercy, to rescue, and to enable his people to serve him in holiness. He is a holy God and all-powerful. His power is shown in his mercy and in his intent to make holiness flourish among his people. He is the God of the holy covenant and of the oath he swore to their father

Abraham, the God of his servant David, the God of the prophets, the God of his people. Thus the prophecy of Zechariah confirms the teaching of the Old Testament about the action of God in choosing, guiding and preparing his people for the salvation soon to come. It also announces the arrival of John as "a prophet of the Most High." He, John, will prepare the way of the Lord, and the people will know the promised salvation from their sins. He will herald the rising sun from heaven.

The prophecy of Zechariah is replete with allusions to the God of the Old Testament, while pointing with more or less clarity to the blessings of the New. Especially notable is the announcement that the salvation "from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us" will have a specific sense. It will above all entail a "knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins." Sin is the "darkness" and "the shadow of death" in which the people are "living," and God is coming to rescue his people from it. This divine visitation will be an act of his "tender mercy" for his people. In the Gospel of St Matthew, the angel

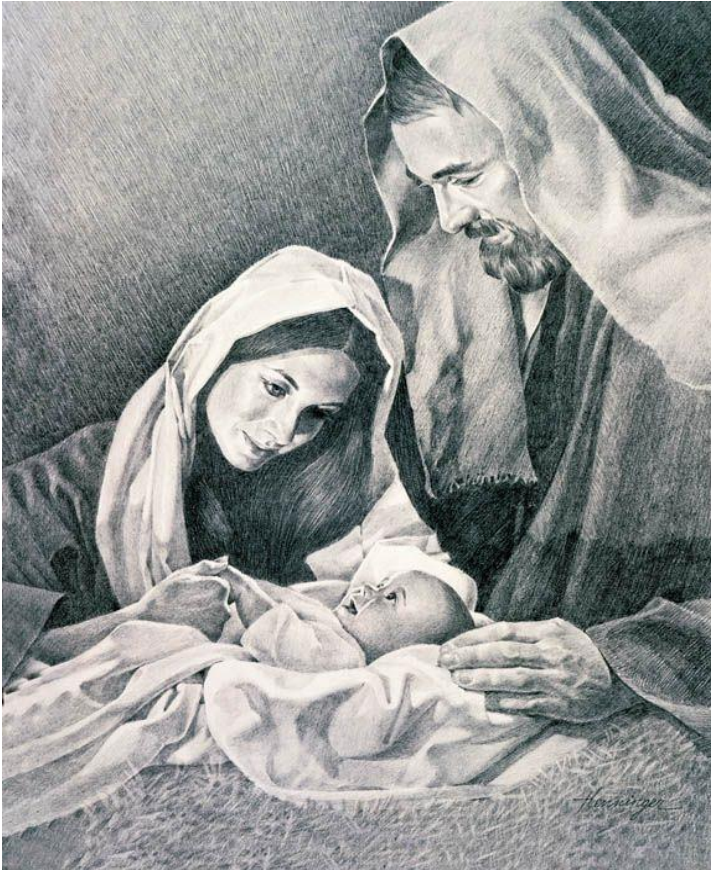
informs Joseph in a dream that the child to be born of Mary, his betrothed, "will save his people from their sins." In the Gospel of St Luke, the Holy Spirit reveals through the prophecy of Zechariah that the salvation soon to come will be a salvation through the forgiveness of sin. Sin is the evil from which God's people will be liberated. It is for this, that John his son shall be a prophet of the Most High. He will prepare the people for the rising sun coming from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. To be noticed here is that in this prophecy there is no mention of the universal scope of the redemption to come. It is a redemption for God's chosen people – and this perhaps reflects the specific mission which the Messiah would have, namely to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. In his reply to the importunate Canaanite woman, our Lord said that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. He himself did not undertake a mission to the Gentile world. This task he would entrust to his Church, that they go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations – and he promised to be with them to the end. Much of this is contained

in seed in the inspired prophecy of Zechariah, the father of the Forerunner.

The eve of Christmas is the moment to be filled with the thought of what is to come. Christ is coming. His coming was prophesied. He came. He remains with us in his body the Church and he will come again. He came to save us from our enemies, the greatest of which is the sin that lies deep within each of us and which at the same time is spread throughout the world. It is the sin of every man and the sin of the world. Christ is the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world. Let us take our stand with him and receive from him the blessings of heaven.



Season of Christmastide



Christmas Day (Vigil Mass)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ex 16: 6-7 Today you will know that the Lord will come, and he will save us, and in the morning you will see his glory.

Collect O God, who gladden us year by year as we wait in hope for our redemption, grant that, just as we joyfully welcome your Only Begotten Son as our Redeemer, we may also merit to face him confidently when he comes again as our Judge. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 88;
 Acts 13: 16-17.22-25; Matthew 1:1-25

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac; and Isaac was the father of Jacob; and Jacob was the father of Judas and his brethren; And Judas was the father of Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares was the father of Esrom; and Esrom was the father of Aram; And Aram was

the father of Aminadab; and Aminadab was the father of Naasson; and Naasson was the father of Salmon; And Salmon was the father of Booz of Rachab; and Booz was the father of Obed of Ruth; and Obed was the father of Jesse; And Jesse was the father of David the king; and David the king was the father of Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias; And Solomon was the father of Roboam; and Roboam was the father of Abia; and Abia was the father of Asa; And Asa was the father of Josaphat; and Josaphat was the father of Joram; and Joram was the father of Ozias; And Ozias was the father of Joatham; and Joatham was the father of Achaz; and Achaz was the father of Ezekias; And Ezekias was the father of Manasses; and Manasses was the father of Amon; and Amon was the father of Josias; And Josias b was the father of Jechonias and his brethren, about the time they were carried away to Babylon: And after they were brought to Babylon, Jechonias was the father of Salathiel; and Salathiel was the father of Zorobabel; And Zorobabel was the father of Abiud; and Abiud was the father of Eliakim; and Eliakim; was the father of Azor; And Azor was the father of Sadoc; and Sadoc was the father of Achim; and Achim b was the father of Eliud;

And Eliud was the father of Eleazar; and Eleazar was the father of Matthan; and Matthan was the father of Jacob; And Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon to Christ are fourteen generations.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way: When as His mother was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to put her to shame, was minded to put her away privately. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying Joseph, son of David, fear not to take Mary as your wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son, and you shall call His name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by

the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph woke and did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not prior to her bringing forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus.” (Matthew 1:1-25)

The Dignity of Man

One of the most obvious issues concerning man and society is that of the dignity of each human being – as well as its widespread denial. The denial of each person’s human dignity is seen in countless forms, but I do not mean to linger here on this aspect of the matter. Consider the dignity of man! Even a child with his but developing power to reason has the sense of the radical difference between, say, an animal and a human being. I have often watched a child barely able to walk behaving with his animal pets in a way that shows he knows implicitly that he and the rest of his family have a dignity and nature not possessed by that animal. Hence they are treated differently. Throughout history philosophers, poets and dramatists have

been enthralled and fascinated by man, by his powers, his dignity and the drama of his frequent tragedy. The key to this dignity? Aristotle especially perceived it as lying in his rational nature as operating above all in his moral life. Man is a rational animal, but not just in the sense of one who can reason things out and provide a demonstration. He is also rational in that he perceives moral truth and by choosing to adhere to it in his practical decisions he grows precisely as a man. Man's unique dignity among the things of this world lies especially in his call to be morally good. This is altogether beyond the animal, of course. How beautiful is the phenomenon of the *good* man, the man of *moral* stature! In this lies man's altogether special dignity in the world. But there is more. Man's spiritual self or soul has come directly from the creative hand of God in all its individuality. Man is an embodied spirit, with his spiritual self being the *form* of his body – thus making up the one human being, to use some of Aristotle's philosophical terminology. God has made the soul of man to *inform* the body which thus becomes, in an amazing unity, not a mere abode but a material extension and expression of man's spiritual self. The point

stressed here, though, is man's special dignity – which flourishes in a moral life and which is demeaned, reduced and besmirched in moral failure. We see this failure enacted in drama such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, just as we see the moral grandeur of man presented somewhat in Sophocles' *Antigone*, nearly two millennia before. Antigone is brought before Creon, where she declares that she knew Creon's law but chose to break it, because of the superiority of 'divine law' to that law made by man.

Consider Antigone. She defied Creon's arguments, provoked his wrath, and perished in moral grandeur. Her moral decision bears witness to and enhances her human dignity. Now, while man naturally perceives his special dignity and the moral path to its enhancement, God for his part has taken steps which give to man a dignity beyond that which he has conferred by nature. *He* has become man, and *this* has conferred a special dignity on the whole material universe. Decades back I was speaking to a learned and intelligent priest much my senior in years, and I was quite struck with one remark he made. I do not

remember the context but his basic point was that material reality has little or no dignity in itself. I found it hard to understand his point, and I could not agree. To begin with, *God* has made the things that are purely material and he sustains them. That is, matter is the object of his divine choice and action. Therefore it has great dignity. Indeed, its range and capacities are astonishing, but there is also man. *Man* is material – not purely so, for he is mainly a spiritual self, but he is material nevertheless. The matter of the world is being continually taken up into himself for his preservation and flourishing. The purely material world thus shares in a sense in the dignity of man. But there is also this, that *God* has *become* man. In becoming man he too took the material world up into himself for his preservation and nourishing – while he walked the earth. He has thus raised the dignity of this material world of ours to a tremendous height. But much more importantly, by his becoming man he has endowed *man* with a breathtaking dignity. By becoming man God has become our brother – while being our Lord, our Ruler and our Judge. He has shown us the way to make this dignity of ours transforming, true and abiding. If we believe in Jesus and are baptised

into him, we share in his divine life. If we follow his way of obedience to the Father in union with him, we shall have a special dignity in his eyes. Here are my mother and my brothers, he once said: anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven – that person is my mother and my brother and my sister. Christ's whole mission was to restore the dignity of man, besmirched and wounded by sin. He atoned for the sin of man, rose from the dead to share with him his own divine life, and then accompanies and empowers him in his quest for holiness by means of the ministry of the Church. The incarnation of the Son of God constitutes the greatest enhancement of man's unique dignity.

On this Vigil of the birth of the Saviour of the world, let us be filled with the thought that in him, the Word become flesh, there is present every heavenly blessing. In him is the fullness of the Godhead bodily. In seeing him, he told his disciples, we see the Father – he is the image of the unseen God, equal to the Father in every way in his divine being. Great is our God, great in his power, great in his loving and compassionate mercy. But precisely because of the Incarnation of

God the Son, we are able also to say, great is *man*, great in his calling, great in his dignity. The Christian must have a deep sense of the special dignity of every human being because God himself has endowed him with this dignity and has shown in all sorts of ways that he himself recognises it.



Christmas Day (Mass During the Night)

Entrance Antiphon Ps 2: 7 The Lord said to me: You are my Son. It is I who have begotten you this day.

Or:

Let us all rejoice in the Lord, for our Saviour has been born in the world. Today true peace has come down to us from heaven.

Collect O God, who have made this most sacred night radiant with the splendour of the true light, grant, we pray, that we, who have known the mysteries of his light on earth, may also delight in his gladness in heaven. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture readings: Isaiah 9: 1-6; Psalm 95;
Titus 2: 11-14; Luke 2: 1-14

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared

with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests. (Luke 2: 1-14)

The Gift of God God has given a stupendous gift to the human race: his own divine Son. As St John writes, God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. As St Paul writes, In him the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily, and in him is found every heavenly blessing. God has become a member of our race, the divine gift which is the fruit of his love for us. Poets and songwriters sing of the marvels of love. Here in the new-born child of Bethlehem there is revealed a love that is out of this world. Love stories tell of tremendous feats of love. Well, here we have an unheard-of feat, the Creator entering into and becoming part of his own creation. Who could have thought that the great and utterly transcendent God could become one of us! He did so, and out of love. Let us join the shepherds as the angels depart, and hasten with them to the manger. They saw before them the strong and saintly Joseph with his all holy wife, and above all, her tiny child. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Christ the

Lord! Let us imagine ourselves there as one of the shepherds, standing near Mary and Joseph. This child will change life for all who accept him, and for all who, like Mary and Joseph, love him. The greatest day in the life of any person is the day they come to know and love and follow this child. It is a day that has come to millions throughout the ages. The day a person meets Jesus in their life is the day they may set out with him for their homeland in heaven. Jesus is the treasure of every man and woman. Mary is our model of what this means. Jesus in her arms is her treasure, as he is the treasure of St Joseph.

God had manifested himself to Moses long before on Mount Sinai amid thunder and lightning and glory. But here was that same God – Yahweh himself! – being held in the arms of a gentle woman beside her humble husband. God showed himself in this babe to be all merciful, to be meek and humble of heart, to be approachable, to be one who would say to all, come to me all you who labour and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. This child is the living God, the rest of our souls. As we think of all the possible things we could hold in our

arms, all the treasures which could be ours, the millions of dollars many lotteries and raffles offer, what would we prefer to hold in our arms, to have before us as our possession? Many would prefer the money. But today we are reminded of what our real treasure is as far as God is concerned. We are reminded of what we were made for. We were made to receive this gift which the Father sent each one of us, and that gift is none other than the Person of Jesus. This is my Son, he whispers. Listen to him! Today we celebrate our Christmas gift, the Father's gift to us – he is Christ the Lord. We join with Mary our mother and Joseph our father and protector, in receiving in our arms the priceless treasure of our souls, the one treasure we should be prepared to forego everything else for because this is the treasure which is our true happiness. Our treasure is the living Jesus. And this same Jesus we each of us receive every time we go to Mass and receive Holy Communion. Jesus was born at Bethlehem in order to give himself to each of us at Holy Communion.

Let us resolve this coming year to make our lives Eucharistic, loving the constant presence of Jesus in the tabernacle of our Church, preparing to receive him worthily by frequent Confession, devoutly making our Sunday Mass and Mass even during the week the centre and source of our Christian life.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.525 (The Christian Mystery)



Christmas Day (Mass at Dawn)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 9: 1, 5; Lk 1: 33 Today a light will shine upon us, for the Lord is born for us; and he will be called Wondrous God, Prince of peace, Father of future ages: and his reign will be without end.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, as we are bathed in the new radiance of your incarnate Word, the light of faith, which illumines our minds, may also shine through in our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture for Dawn Mass: Isaiah 62:11-12; Psalm 97:1, 6, 11-12;

Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20

When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the

manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them. (Luke 2:15-20)

Celebrating Jesus On Christmas day we wish one another a very happy Christmas. It is a beautiful thing to mean by this to wish another the joy of having a Saviour born for us. But this true meaning of Christmas has surely been largely lost from view. At Christmas many political leaders offer Christmas wishes to the public. How rare in their Christmas messages is any principal reference to the Person of Jesus Christ, and any acknowledgment of who he really is. The world of business regards Christmas as an important time indeed, but it is important because of its commercial value. Christmas is successful if a lot of money has been spent on purchasing their wares. Our society is rightly described as secular, and with this secularism there is present in

our culture a subtle and all pervasive pressure to separate man from God, and to treat God as a purely personal and indeed subjective notion. God is excluded from social and public life, and so it is an embarrassment to mention Christ openly. Christmas has become a secular celebration, a good time in a material and social sense. I read some years back that in China the government was allowing the commercial celebration of Christmas in Shanghai (with figures of Santa Claus and Christmas trees) *in order to boost buying and selling*, while of course repressing all independent worship of Christ.

Christ is used for secular purposes. While Christ is pushed out of sight in order to celebrate a world without God, the convinced Christian welcomes Christ as the Lord of the world. "I bring you news of great joy," the angel said to the shepherds, "a saviour has been born to you, Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:1-14). He is mankind's Messiah and Lord. We remember how Thomas bowed before the risen Jesus and said, My Lord and my God. Our Lord himself said that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him by his heavenly Father. So

then, as we celebrate Christmas, let us intend to celebrate Jesus our Lord and his coming, and not just secular values. We ought not allow ourselves to be drawn unconsciously into a celebration of the good things of life with no real reference to Christ. On Christmas day let us welcome Christ, and not just a merry time. Let us acknowledge him as the gift of God to the whole of humanity. He is the One who makes all the difference to everything.

Let us place the Person of Jesus Christ at the centre of our Christmas celebration. He is the King of kings, Lord of lords. Amid our celebrations, let us not forget him!



Christmas Day (Mass During the Day)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 9: 5 A child is born for us, and a son is given to us; his sceptre of power rests upon his shoulder, and his name will be called Messenger of great counsel.

Collect O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and still more wonderfully restored it, grant, we pray, that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture for Mass during the day: Isaiah 52: 7-10; Psalm 97;
Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. There

came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' From the fulness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but

God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. (John 1: 1-18)

The Meaning of Christmas

Throughout the world, Christmas is celebrated as a day of joy. Joy to the world – we sing – the Lord is come! It is a time of excitement, happiness, and family. One little child was so happy on Christmas night that he said, "I wish every day was Christmas!" The marvel is that in a sense every day can be a kind of Christmas. Today we celebrate God becoming man, one of us. Having become man, he never leaves us, for he is always present with us in the life of the Church, and in a most real and intense way in the Eucharist. At the Vigil or Midnight mass, the Gospel tells us how Jesus, the Saviour, Messiah and Lord was born in a stable and laid in a manger. The angels appeared to the shepherds, gave them the good news, and sang about what God had done. At the first morning Mass the Gospel describes the shepherds hurrying to the hill town of Bethlehem to find the Child, and worship him, their Messiah and Lord, who had been promised for so long. The readings and prayers of the

third Christmas morning Mass review the whole mystery of Christmas and what it means. What then does Christmas mean? Christmas means that the prophecies and promises have been fulfilled. Only God knows the future, and in God's name Isaiah had foretold what would happen. The Lord God himself would come to redeem us. The New Testament tells us that he who is son of God and son of Mary came to save every one of us and to bring his salvation to the ends of the earth. He became man for each of us – for me! – as if there were no one else. He was born to give us rebirth as children of God; he suffered our troubles to give us peace; and shared our weakness to give us a share in his glory and kingdom. God wants us to know him and become like him. St John did not simply say, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and he remained being God. Of course the Word did remain being God. But he added that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, while remaining God. The Word of God became man so that man might share his life and become like him.

Let us not imagine that all this was easy for the Son of God. He suffered far more than any other human being has ever suffered, while being filled with far more joy. The Word! Setting aside the references in Scripture to the word that God uttered in creation and the word he uttered to his priests, prophets and kings, let us ask what is a "word" in ordinary usage. A word is something we express with our voice and lips or write down in order to convey a thought or feeling we wish to communicate to others. Sometimes this thought or feeling can be difficult to put into words. A word stands for a conception of something, or an experience. We even speak of "conceiving" a thought, or "generating" ideas, as if the word were a spiritual child. After much effort we can find the right word which perfectly expresses our understanding. The Word of God is the expression of God's understanding of himself, the perfect expression of all he is, "generated" by him from all eternity. As St Paul tells us in one of his Letters, Christ is the image of the unseen God. Our Lord told his disciples that "he who sees me sees the Father." Jesus, whose being and nature is that of the Father while being distinct in Person from the

Person of the Father, assumed everything that we are in our nature (except for sin), while remaining divine in his Person. In sharing our human nature (while retaining his own) the only element that did not touch him was sin, and it is precisely sin which makes us less human. Jesus, in this sense, was more human than we are because he was utterly sinless and incapable of sin. The Word of God became flesh in order to empower us to become children of God and live a life pleasing to him. He achieved this by taking on himself the sins of the world and freely expiating for them. Each of us can say, Christ Jesus loved me and delivered himself for me. Christmas is the celebration of the Word of God becoming flesh in order to suffer and die for each of us. It reveals God's love for each of us. It is the joy of the world that God sent mankind a Redeemer.

Let us celebrate Christmas joyfully, full of the thought of God's love for us while resolving to love one another as he has loved us.



The Fifth Day in the Octave of Christmas

Entrance Antiphon Jn 3: 16 God so loved the world that he gave his Only Begotten Son, so that all who believe in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.

Collect Almighty and invisible God, who dispersed the darkness of this world by the coming of your light, look, we pray, with serene countenance upon us, that we may acclaim with fitting praise the greatness of the Nativity of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 2:3-11; Psalm 96:1-2a, 2b-3, 5b-6;

Luke 2:22-35

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping

with what is said in the Law of the Lord: a pair of doves or two young pigeons. Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too. (Luke 2:22-35)

Simeon's Prophecy In the Gospels of Mark and John the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God commences with the inauguration of his public ministry. Most scholars allow that Mark's Gospel, representing especially the preaching of St Peter, is the earliest to have been set down in written form. Most propose that John's is the last of the four. In both cases God's revelation of who Jesus is and the nature of his mission commences with John's prophetic ministry, his proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah and his baptism of Jesus. The case is different with both Matthew and Luke. Matthew's account of Christ's *public ministry* does indeed begin with the ministry and proclamation of John the Baptist, but his Gospel as such starts with the revelation of the person of Jesus before his birth and continues in its immediate aftermath. Matthew informs us that Joseph had been told by the Angel in a dream that the unborn Child of his betrothed was conceived *of the Holy Spirit* and would save his people *from their sins* (1: 20-21). He was, accordingly, to be named Jesus. St Luke's Gospel does not begin with the public ministry and the prophetic testimony of John the Baptist either – although his Infancy account does begin with

the revelation about the Precursor prior to his birth. It is followed then by the revelation about Christ prior to his birth. In this sense there is a structure similar to Mark and John. Immediately prior to the Child's conception, Mary was informed by the Angel that she would conceive her Child by *the power of the Holy Spirit*. He would be great – Messiah, son of David, Son of God, and his throne eternal. There is a revelation to Mary not only of the Incarnation but implicitly of the Holy Trinity. Soon after, under divine inspiration Elizabeth pronounced the Child of Mary to be the mother of her *Lord*. But that is not all. Nine months later the new born Child was brought to the Temple and the Holy Spirit led Simeon to the humble parents, moving unnoticed as they were among the worshipers. Speaking in prophecy, Simeon informs Mary and Joseph that their Child is the salvation sent by God. The Angel had informed Mary and Joseph that their Child was the promised Messiah of God's chosen people, and that he would save his people from their sins. But in his prophetic utterance Simeon reveals more of the scope of his redemptive mission. He is "a light" for "revelation to

the Gentiles". He is not only the glory of the chosen people. He is the Saviour of the *world*, Redeemer of *mankind*.

We are told that both the "father and mother" of the Child "marvelled at what was said about him." The prophets themselves had been progressively enlightened as to what was to come. Simeon too had been enlightened by the Holy Spirit as to who the Messiah was and what would be his mission. Some thirty years later John the Baptist would be enlightened as to who the Messiah was. He would also be enlightened by Christ himself as to the real course of his Messianic mission. It is clear from the Gospel accounts that the parents of Jesus also received light from on high, and they both "marvelled" at what they were being told. They lived by faith. They were led from light to light that came from God through his messengers and servants, beginning at the Child's conception and continuing after his birth. First the *Angel*, then Elizabeth, then Simeon and Anna – and through each, God was leading the parents of Jesus to understand in its essential elements the full identity and mission of their glorious son. And Simeon had more to

tell them. Their Child's mission would involve division, contestation, contradiction and great suffering. "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2: 22-35). It will not be a path of glory and triumphant success as were the paths of certain great rulers – "saviours" – of the world. The Child will be spoken against. Among God's people, some will rise and others will fall because of him. The good will suffer with him – and, addressing himself to Mary, "a sword will pierce your own soul too." The Holy Spirit is informing Mary and Joseph that the mission of their messianic Child will be a path of suffering. He had come into this world to suffer and, mysteriously, his obedient suffering would be the means of bringing glory to his people and salvation to the Gentiles. Simeon, in addressing Mary, intimates that she will be especially associated with him in this path of suffering – and perhaps intimates to Joseph that he will not live to see this day.

Let us ponder on the mission of the Saviour as it is laid out before the notice of his holy parents, who marvel as they hear the words of prophecy. Let us gaze on the Child, truly man and truly God. How wondrous is the phenomenon of this Child! There in the arms of Simeon lies the great God who sustains the universe by his love. There in his arms lies God become man who has entered the lists as our Champion and who will take up his shield, wield his spear, and begin his great and victorious charge. He will come thundering and will smite the enemy and set us free. But what is his shield? What is his spear? What is his charge? It is the cross of Calvary. Dead on the Cross, having traversed the path of humility and suffering, he will have laid the enemy low. Ah, Lord! Now I begin!



Sixth Day in the Octave of Christmas

Entrance Antiphon Wis 18:14-15 When a profound silence covered all things and night was in the middle of its course, your all-powerful Word, O Lord, bounded from heaven's royal throne.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that the newness of the Nativity in the flesh of your Only Begotten Son may set us free, for ancient servitude holds us bound beneath the yoke of sin. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 2:12-17; Psalm 96:7-8a, 8b-9, 10;
 Luke 2:36-40

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks

to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him (Luke 2: 36-40)

The example of Anna The flame of religion burns with great variety in the histories of different people. We think of those whose turn to God is distinguished by a decisive conversion. St Paul's conversion was so dramatic that the phrase, "A Damascus experience," is a byword for a sudden and enduring conversion. Augustine had been living in sin and dallying with non-Catholic religious creeds and, due especially to the unceasing prayers and love of his holy mother Monica, he underwent a conversion. His conversion was an extraordinary one in its fruitfulness. He became one of the most dominant saints in the Church's history. Other conversions could be cited. In 1845 John Henry Newman, the leader of the Oxford Movement in England, converted to the Catholic Church. But there are other disciples of

Christ whose stories are not defined by a visible change in course. Of course, in the life of every Christian there must be a turning away from sin and an acceptance of the truth of the Gospel. Indeed, this has to be going on throughout life and if sanctity is to be attained, conversion from sin must be a daily and frequent occurrence. But in many – perhaps even the majority – this change is gradual and not especially visible. Imagine a flash back from the past. A farming family has a small holding in a fairly remote valley among the mountains of New South Wales. The parents are religious and they say the Rosary every evening as a family, getting to Mass when the priest comes to their district once a month. The children grow, and gradually the varied quality of their religious faith slowly becomes apparent. One seems to be worldly, and his religion, though there, is never the ruling factor. He never truly understands it because it never becomes the love of his life. His younger sister, though, has always been religious and her Catholic faith seems always to be growing. She has many struggles in life and has to recognize her faults and repent from them, but her religion is real and deep. She loves God, prayer, the Mass, the

Sacraments and her Faith. She outlives her brothers and sisters and lives a long life with her religion never failing. She ends her days in the arms of the Lord, with Christ and the Church meaning everything to her.

In our Gospel today (Luke 2: 36-40), we are presented with the impressive figure of Anna the prophetess. There is no suggestion of a Damascus-like, or Augustine-like, or Newman-like conversion at any point of her life. Of course, we do not know, but it looks as if she was religious from her earliest years, her immersion in God growing with the decades of her life. We read that "She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying" (Luke 2: 36-40). There is no mention of children, and it seems as if once her husband died she gave herself up to the Lord's service with abandon of heart. She seems to own nothing, but lives in the Temple night and day, perhaps having her sleeping mat and simple shelter in some hidden cranny among the vast

structure. Who knows, but there she may have been perhaps for many decades. She may have known and been revered by the parents and grandparents of Mary the mother of the Child. She has lived in God, and the Holy Spirit has at times spoken through her to people – she is a prophetess and a holy daughter of Sion. Like Simeon, she too looks forward with ardour to the coming of the Messiah – and now, O joy of joys! – the Messiah is suddenly in the Temple. This she knows by an inspiration. The Holy Spirit leads her – and to him. The Child of Mary is he. Simeon has handed him back to his mother, and Anna stands by their side with a pure joy filling her faithful soul. She gazes on the serene Child and sees in him the wonder of the world. She raises her eyes and gazes on the holy couple before her, each of whom outstrips her in holiness. Beautiful soul is Anna! Anna the prophetess, embodiment of the best of Israel, as is Simeon who has just prophesied over the Child and his coming sufferings – what a grouping is this. There we have before us the hidden pinnacle of holiness in the Old Testament: Jesus, Mary and Joseph with Simeon and Anna by their side. How heaven must have smiled in joy at the sight.

Anna the prophetess lived her whole life for God and doubtlessly ended her days – perhaps not long after – in the odour of sanctity. Her life was grand and yet filled with a humble round in the Temple, day and night in fasting and prayer before God. Whatever be our route to God, let us hold fast to him when we find him and never let go. Let us humbly run the race to the finish where the crown awaits us. Fidelity is the name, and this faithfulness is lived out in the ordinary things of an ordinary life. Thus – as with Anna – does the ordinary and little life become grand.



Seventh Day in the Octave of Christmas

Entrance Antiphon Is 9: 5 A child is born for us, and a son is given to us; his sceptre of power rests upon his shoulder, and his name will be called Messenger of great counsel.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who in the Nativity of your Son established the beginning and fulfilment of all religion, grant, we pray, that we may be numbered among those who belong to him, in whom is the fullness of human salvation. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 2:18-21; Psalm 96:1-2, 11-12, 13;

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. There

came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' From his fullness we have all received one grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the Only Begotten, who is

at the Father's side, has made him known. (John 1:1-18)

The Word

Most religions seem to have an account of the beginnings, meaning by this an account of the beginnings of either the people who possess this account, or of the world. The Australian aborigines have their powerful Dreamtime, and numerous other myths of the peoples could be cited. It seems to be one of the functions of religion that it provide this answer to what is a fundamental question. In this, religion has competed with science, with science gradually supplanting the myths of religion and claiming authority to tell the whole story of the beginnings. So it is that in the imagination of many people, science now occupies the chair of religion. In his Oxford University sermon of December 11, 1831, John Henry Newman spoke of "The Usurpations of Reason," and much of his point is that this happens when reason strays beyond its own province. It certainly pronounces beyond its competence when it claims to teach the whole story of the beginnings. The Big Bang, of course, does not account for the beginnings because the Bang itself had to begin, and that required

an ultimate uncaused Beginner of the Bang. In any case the Bang does not account for the ontological insufficiency of the transient, contingent and limited being that is the world. Be all that as it may, Revealed Religion tells us of the *ultimate* beginnings. As the first verses of the book of Genesis reveal, God spoke and the world began. Just what exactly God did in the world and with the world we leave to science to discover if it can. But the world began in time, and it began because of the act of the one Creator. Genesis teaches that were it not for God there would be no world at all. Why, then, is there not nothing? There is not nothing because God willed that there be something. He, the One without beginning who is sustained in being by no other, began and sustains in being all that is other than He. But there is a further revelation and it is set forth by St John at the outset of his Gospel. The word by which God brought all creation into being, the word which he uttered to his servants the prophets, this Word was with God in the beginning.

Whatever point we take as being “the beginning”, there at that point the Word was with God. The Word did not begin, nor did God. At “the beginning”, there was the Word, and the Word was with God (*ho theos*), and – surprise of surprises! – the Word was God (*theos*)! At the outset of his Gospel St John begins forthwith to speak of the mystery of the most holy Trinity. The one and only God is not just one Person. The Word who became flesh is also this one and only God (*kai theos ϵ n ho logos*). The Word, becoming flesh and dwelling among us, will reveal the Person of the Holy Spirit, who will in turn glorify and bear witness to him and to the Father. Our Gospel passage today (John 1:1-18) is traditionally called the Prologue of the Gospel of St John. It sets before us a grand panorama of the beginning of time and of the redemption of the world. We are taken immediately to the heart of reality as it has been from all eternity and we are invited to accept the invitation to enter into communion with the great God who has deigned to reveal himself to us. In simple strokes, like the gentle unfolding of a grand symphony, St John tells us of the Word who will be the protagonist of his Good News. It was through him that we and

all else was made. In him is life and that life is our light. It is a powerful light and the darkness cannot comprehend it nor can it master it. There is no other true light for man other than what is in him, so we must choose to regard him as our only Way and our only Truth. He is the Light of the world, and the one who follows him walks in the light, while the one who rejects him walks forever in the darkness. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and it is this which we celebrate during the Christmas season. God made man is the glory of God, and this glory has been seen by man. As the inspired author says, "we saw his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." He brings to us the fullness – the fullness of life, abundant life – "and of his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."

Let us contemplate the grand and lofty Person of Jesus Christ, born a babe, an historical man for his brief span, dead on the cross, risen and now present in all his fullness in his mystical body the Church. He brings to us the fullness of grace and life and light, grace upon grace. He is our hope and to him we must cleave. Let us, with

our hand in his, walk by his side as, not his servants, but his friends. I have not called you servants but friends, he says. Let us tread his path whatever be the cost of each day, for he will take us with him into glory.



Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

Entrance Antiphon Lk 2: 16 The shepherds went in haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the Infant lying in a manger.

Collect O God, who were pleased to give us the shining example of the Holy Family, graciously grant that we may imitate them in practising the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity, and so, in the joy of your house, delight one day in eternal rewards. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Holy Family: "The home of Nazareth is the school where we begin to understand the life of Jesus - the school of the Gospel. First, then, a lesson of silence. May esteem for silence, that admirable and indispensable condition of mind, revive in us. A lesson on family life. May Nazareth teach us what family life is, its communion of love, its austere and simple beauty, and its sacred and inviolable character. A lesson of work. Nazareth, home of the Carpenter's Son, in you I would

choose to understand and proclaim the severe and redeeming law of human work." (Pope Paul VI at Nazareth, January 5, 1964). Pope John Paul II once said, "The family, more than any other human reality, is the place in which the person is loved for himself and in which he learns to live the sincere gift of self" (November 27, 2002).

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 3:3-7.14-17; Psalm 127;
 Colossians 3:12-21; Luke 2:41-52

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his

understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you. Why were you searching for me? he asked. Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house? But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men.” (Luke 2:41-52)

Sanctifying one's home Today we think of the Holy Family, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The long awaited Messiah chose to begin his redemptive work in the midst of a simple and normal family. So the first reality which our Lord sanctified by his presence was a home and family. Little that was extraordinary – except what is narrated in the Infancy Narratives – occurred during these years at Nazareth where our Lord spent the greatest part of his life. Joseph was the head of the family; as such he sustained Jesus and Mary with his work. He it was

who received the angelic message to give the child the name Jesus. From him our Lord learnt a trade, a means of making a living. To him Christ would often have shown his admiration and affection. From Mary, Jesus learned manners of speech, perhaps popular sayings full of wisdom which later he would use in his preaching. He watched how she used a little yeast in the dough so as to make it rise. If an item of clothing tore, he watched how she patched it. Years later our Lord would draw the material for his parables from this common everyday knowledge. How pleased must the Father and the entire realm of heaven have been at the sight of the Holy Family at Nazareth! It was all that God had planned for home and family in its perfection. One thing this tells us is that every little aspect of our ordinary everyday lives can be used for a great and holy purpose. Everything we do should be made holy. Everything we do should be done in such a way that we will be holier as a result. And everything we do should be done in a way that will sanctify others as well. All of this can be done in a perfectly normal household and life. The seemingly ordinary home of Nazareth was very

holy. Between Mary and Joseph there was a holy love, a spirit of service, an understanding and desire to provide one another with a happy life. Thus was the family of Jesus made sacred, holy, exemplary, a model of the human virtues, and disposed to fulfil exactly the will of God. The Christian home ought be an imitation of the holy home of Nazareth, a home where God reigns and is at the heart of family love.

Is our home aiming to be like that? Do we dedicate time and attention to the home and to modelling it on that of Jesus? Is Jesus the very centre of our home? In the family, the parents are the first educators of the faith to their children, by means of their word and by example. This was fulfilled in a most singular manner in the case of the Holy Family. The Holy Family recited with devotion the traditional prayers prayed in every devout Hebrew home. One can imagine the fervour with which the Holy Family recited the psalms, and with what devotion they read the Scriptures. We could ask ourselves, Do I teach my children their prayers, and do I teach them to pray with great devotion? Do my children see a spirit of prayer in the family? Do we

pray the Rosary which is the prayerful contemplation of the Gospel and the mystery of Christ? A family united to Christ is a member of his mystical body, and the Church calls it a 'domestic church'. The Christian family ought be a reflection of the Church itself in being a living testimony to Christ. In the Holy Family, every Christian family has a lofty example. The family is also the basic and most simple form of society. It is the principal school of all the social virtues and social life, for in the family a person exercises obedience, concern for others, a sense of responsibility, understanding and help, loving cooperation among different ways of living. So it is that the health of society depends on the health of families. How important then is it that every family have a correct *model* of family life: this model is the Holy Family. Families were created for the honour and service of God, and so God must be first in our families in everything. The family that thinks that worldly happiness is more important than eternal life with God, is headed for tragedy and disappointment.

In today's readings, God's wisdom gives us norms for family life. Each family has a choice: it can follow either the wisdom of God or that of the world, and families broken by following the wrong choice are legion. Families ought reflect on today's scriptural passages, and pray and discuss and come to a common understanding of family life in Christ. Let us make the resolution to have the Holy Family as our constant model of family life.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2234-2243
(Authority in Civil Society)

A Second Reflection for the Feast of the Holy Family

God and the Family If there is one thing which is the cause of so much joy and sorrow in the world, it is family life. We are born into a family, we grow in a family, we are meant to be members of a family and to find our happiness in a family. Today is the feast of the Holy Family, when we are presented with the most perfect family possible, that of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Theirs is the highest model of family

life we could hope for. Theirs was a perfect family life. Today's readings invite us to make a serious reflection on family life, in the light of the Holy Family. The first thing we notice in the Gospel reading of today (Luke 2:41-52) is the long period of obedience through which our Lord himself passed within the Holy Family. This shows two things: firstly how important obedience is to family life, and secondly, how obedience to authority is as honourable as the exercise of authority. Order in society requires obedience to God and to human authority. It requires the capacity to obey. But many parents dislike forming their children in obedience. Many parents themselves are poorly formed in obedience, and when put to the test they do not obey. Our Lord's thirty years at Nazareth shows how honourable it is to *obey* legitimate authority. And as we think also of Mary and Joseph exercising legitimate authority within the home, we realise how important it is to *exercise* authority for the right reason and in the right way. Mary and Joseph are the supreme models for all parents on the use of authority in the home. Of course, the ultimate authority in any family is that of God himself. The Holy Family placed God before all

else. Families are created for the honour and the glory of God, and his holy will must be the first thing in family life. Is not that how it was with the Holy Family?

We ought not to think that God is there to serve us (though he does serve us). Our aim should be to serve God. And indeed, we shall find that if a family desires to serve God, he will serve them. Do you want a happy family life? Then have as your aim that all in the family see family life as being for God's glory. The Church teaches that a Christian family is meant by God to be a domestic church: Christ ought be its head. One result of this will be that out of many families will come vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Families should learn to respect calls from God. Mary and Joseph saw this more clearly when they found our Lord in the Temple. Some parents resist the will of God for their children. A young boy once wrote letters to a priest about his desire to be a priest. Later he wrote in one letter: 'I told my father, and you'd think I had committed murder.' Soon he wrote no more. The lack of support and even opposition coming from within

one's family can destroy a vocation. St John the Apostle was young when he left all and followed our Lord. Think of what he would have been cheated of if his parents (Zebedee and his wife) had forbidden him to follow our Lord. God claims first place in every family, and family happiness includes respecting that claim. St Thomas More knew that and put God first. He considered a religious vocation, but discovered he had no call to it, so he married. He became a loving husband and father, chancellor of England, and martyr for the Catholic faith. He lived as a model father of a family, putting Christ at its head, and always respecting his calls.

Cardinal Newman once wrote that religion is essentially a matter of authority and obedience. He meant that in religion we recognize the authority of God and we resolve absolutely to obey him. The family is the school of both authority and obedience, but under God and his holy law. Let us resolve to take for our model the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. There never has been a family its equal in the history of the world.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1655-1658

(The Domestic Church)

A Third Reflection for the Feast of the Holy Family

Ordinary Family Life It is very possible to look back on the past year, and then ahead to the year that is coming, and to think that an ordinary life such as the one we live is a life of little value. It is also very easy to settle for mediocrity in an ordinary life, thinking that nothing much in an ordinary life is possible. But in fact, ordinary life is meant by God to be something grand, noble, because truly holy. Consider the Holy Family. God became man with a great work to do. What did he do for most of the time? He lived as a member of a seemingly ordinary family for 90% of his life. Thirty of the thirty three years of his life he spent in obscurity, in the ordinary round of a hidden family life, with its simple but demanding duties. This shows how

important such a life is, and its great potential in God's plan. What was the distinctive character of that life lived by our Lord, together with his mother and foster-father? It was its holiness. That is what made it so special, so unique, so filled with value and grandeur.

God in his providence gives each person certain responsibilities. There are responsibilities to one's own self, especially the responsibility of answering the call to grow in the love of God. There are responsibilities to one's family, and to the Christian community, such as to one's parish. There are responsibilities to one's daily or professional work, the work which God in his providence has placed in one's hands. All these responsibilities are usually out of the sight of the world and of the acclaim of others. They are mostly fairly hidden, and consist of a daily round of little duties which, when faithfully and well done day by day, result in good work being achieved. God wants us to do good work, good work on ourselves, good work in our families, good work in our parish, good work in our workplace, whatever that work may be. We may not succeed in lots of

respects, but he wants us to work at it perseveringly every day, and to do so as one who lives in his presence. He sees our inmost thoughts, and he knows what our efforts have been. Our aim should be to do our work in life such that it will be something good and holy, a worthy offering to him. It should be done such that we will be holier as a result, and others will be holier too.

Thus will God be glorified. Personal holiness should characterise our daily life, and our God-given work is a means to it. Let us gaze on the Holy Family, hidden in obscurity all those years. What a lesson it is of the grandeur and possibilities of the ordinary life – the life God has given us to live.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2232-2233
(The Family and the Kingdom)



Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God (January 1)

Entrance Antiphon Hail, Holy Mother, who gave birth to the King,
who rules heaven and earth for ever.

Or: Cf. Is 9: 1, 5; Lk 1: 33 Today a light will shine upon us, for the
Lord is born for us; and he will be called Wondrous God, Prince of
peace, Father of future ages: and his reign will be without end.

Collect O God, who through the fruitful virginity of Blessed Mary
bestowed on the human race the grace of eternal salvation, grant, we
pray, that we may experience the intercession of her, through whom we
were found worthy to receive the author of life, our Lord Jesus Christ,
your Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy
Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Numbers 6: 22-27; Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8;
Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21

So the shepherds hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. (Luke 2: 16-21)

Mother of God One of the features of the ancient world – the world of the time of Jesus – was that it was brimful of religions. From Egypt to Mesopotamia to Greece and to Rome itself, life swarmed with the tenets of religion. The imagination of the ancient world was deeply imprinted by religious myth. But out of Palestine suddenly came a religion that was being announced with urgency, with persistence and assurance. It allowed for no other religion as being true – though it did

allow for *seeds* of truth to be present in them. Its claim was that a man who had lived and had been executed there when Pilate was Procurator, was now alive. He was the long expected Messiah. Many had heard of this Jewish expectation of a great Messiah. Now many had identified him, and were spreading the word across the Empire. There was no disputing that he was an historical man: all knew this. He had been put to death by the civil authority (Tacitus in his *Annals* XV: 44 tells us that “Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius”). But what was being claimed was that he had come forth from the tomb alive, and that he is the only God. So was his heavenly Father! So was a mysterious third divine Person. These were not three more gods for the pantheon of the Roman world, but only one God – there were no others! It was an exclusive truth and was judged to be profoundly subversive of the religious fabric of the Empire, throbbing and heaving as it was in a cauldron of religions. The core of it all was that this man Jesus, this Messiah, was the one and only God. That, in essence, is precisely what the Christian celebrates during the season of Christmas. In the

beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the *Word was God*. At Christmas we celebrate that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and some saw his glory, the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. There have been numerous high gods in the religions of man, and there were high gods in the ancient world. Jupiter was the king of the gods for the Roman state. His counterpart in Greek religion was Zeus, in Etruscan religion, Tinia, and in Hindu mythology, Indra. But none of these high gods compared in height and power with Yahweh, the God of Jewish revelation. The Christians now had it that this one God was three Persons. The second of them became a man, and that he had sent his followers to convert the world.

One of the reasons why both Matthew and Luke stress the events of the conception, birth and infancy of Jesus Christ is to emphasize that the great God did truly become man. He did not just suddenly appear among men and walk with them as one does with friends. No, he was truly conceived, but miraculously of a

Virgin. Emphatically he was truly conceived. God began his human course as a child in the womb. His mother had a name, lived in a certain location and at a very particular time. How came she to be his mother, while being a virgin nevertheless? The explanation is provided. It was by a miraculous intervention of God that this Virgin, by the power of the Holy Spirit, truly conceived this divine Child. From her he derived his humanity while remaining the God he had been for all eternity. A divine Person, he now assumed a human nature as well. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin gave to the Word, as would a mother to her offspring – but without any human father – the human nature he assumed to his divine Person. In one miraculous moment she gave and he received. Thus there began in the womb of the virgin the earthly course of God made man. Mary was not the mere receptacle of the second divine Person become man, the eternal Word become flesh. The incarnate Son of God now had a human mother. By the power of God he drew from her his manhood and her DNA passed to him. He was conceived, nourished in the womb, born in a stable at Bethlehem, cared for as an infant, grew in

nature and grace as a youth, fulfilled all that was good and due as a young man, and was manifested to the world. The world had a brother and a Saviour beyond all possible expectation. He began his course with a mother and he ended his course with a mother. While on the cross he gave this mother to all his beloved disciples, and this same mother will be his and ours for all eternity. Thus it is that at the beginning of the year we think of Mary the mother of God, God the Son made man. The Incarnation is no myth, but a cold, hard and sober fact. It is part of real history, and the divine motherhood of the Virgin Mary attests to the historical truth of the Incarnation.

Let every Christian think of the greatness of Christ's mother. All generations will call me blessed, she said to her kinswoman Elizabeth. Blessed are you among women, Elizabeth had said to her. The Almighty has looked upon his lowly servant, Mary said. She is the mother of Jesus Christ, and therefore is the mother of God the Son made man. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death!

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.964-970

(Mary's Motherhood with regard to the Church)

Second Sunday after Christmas

Entrance Antiphon Wisdom 18: 14-15 When a profound silence covered all things and night was in the middle of its course, your all powerful Word, O Lord, bounded from heaven's royal throne.

Collect Almighty ever living God, splendour of faithful souls, graciously be pleased to fill the world with your glory, and show yourself to all peoples by the radiance of your light. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 24:1-4.12-16; Psalm 147;
Ephesians 1:3-6.15-18; John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all

things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" Out of his fullness we have all received, grace

upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (John 1:1-18)

The Light Socrates was renowned for his dependence on *reasoning*, subjecting all comers to its searching scrutiny. He also showed many of the signs of being a *spiritual* person. He would often spend time in meditation, and sometimes would go into trances where he did not move for hours (*Symposium*, 175a-b, 220c). He received messages in his dreams and he followed these messages (*Crito*, 44a; *Apology*, 33c; *Phaedo*, 60e). The most famous of his *spiritual* characteristics, however, was his messages from his *daimonion*, or divine sign. In Plato's *Apology*, he said that this "divine or spiritual" sign was "a sort of voice" that had come to him since childhood (*Apology*, 31d). He also said this voice, when it acts, tells him *not* to do something he is thinking of doing, but never tells him positively *to do* something (*Apology*) – and this related, it seems, to matters beyond the scope of

his reason. Whether this account of Plato's ought to be accepted at face value is another matter, but I see no reason to deny it may have been an authentic religious experience. The extent of Socrates' trust in his *daimonion*'s guidance is revealed when he faced death – it did not warn him against it. So death must not be an evil thing, he concluded. For all his life of rational discussion with those whom he met and conversed in Athens, Socrates was a man of piety, especially towards his perceived *daimonion*, or divine voice. In view of Socrates' life and mission, which included not only his influence in Athens but his influence on Plato and Aristotle and their legacy, God may have been according him a special guidance from time to time over and above the distinctive natural gifts that he had given him. God may have been providing a special light to a pagan, a man of piety and a religious guide to many others. The upshot was an altogether impressive man. We read in Plato's *Crito* how, at the end of their conversation, Socrates says to Crito: "Leave me, then, Crito, to fulfil the will of God, and to follow whither he leads" (*Crito*, 54). This, despite the fact that Socrates perceived this to involve the duty to administer to himself the suicidal

poison given him by the state for his execution. So here we have a man renowned for his pagan insight, his natural goodness, his rationality and piety – and favoured, perhaps, with an occasional light from heaven in some form. This guided him to a better life – however Socrates may have *interpreted* this.

St John in his Prologue tells us that *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.* The Word about which John begins his Gospel was the life and light of all mankind. So we have identified for us here the “light of all mankind”. It is the “Word” of God, with God from the beginning which is to say from all eternity. This Word is the full eternal expression of God’s knowledge of both himself and everything that is. He is the Light that is of and in God. He is the source of whatever true light that is in man. Socrates was renowned for his moral rationality – he has been considered as one of the most

remarkable figures in history with a tremendous influence on Western civilization. As a precursor of Plato and Aristotle, he established, we might say, the spirit of Reason, the desire to see things as they are and to follow the argument where it leads. As said, he was also favoured, according to his own account as reported by Plato, with some special divine assistance. Well, St John in his Prologue informs us that whatever positive light this might have entailed, had its origin in the *Word* – the light of all mankind. The action of the Word is traced in the Hebrew Scriptures prior to the Word becoming flesh. It is the source of life and created reality: God *spoke*, and it was *so* (Genesis 1:9.15.24.30). It is the source of light and understanding: to prophet after prophet the Word of God came so that the people might understand, and obeying might have life rather than death. The Word of God, his divine λόγος who is the source of all that was so important in salvation history and the history of the world, was now becoming flesh. For all that is truly *light*, he surpassed Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, as well as all inspired prophets, beyond imagining. The glory of it all was that the Word became man in order to unite himself to

every man. There would be a clear way to partake of his light, that light which is the life of every man. It would be by becoming *his disciple* – and all the nations were to be called to be his disciples. All authority has been given to me. *Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations* (Matthew 28:19).

It is a truly wonderful thing that we have been granted the means for mankind and each individual to be delivered from the darkness of error and sin, and placed in the kingdom of light. This is what is on offer for all, and so the most humble person – in talent far behind such persons as Socrates and Plato, or Moses, Samuel and Elijah – may live in the light. This light was in stupendous abundance for humble and holy Mary and Joseph. This was because they received the Word into their lives and hearts wholeheartedly when it was offered to them. It is offered to each of us through the ministry of the Church. Let us receive wholeheartedly the Word who is made flesh, and live accordingly. In this way our house will be built on rock.

Monday before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon A holy day has dawned upon us: Come, you nations, and adore the Lord, for a great light has come down upon the earth.

Collect Grant your people, O Lord, we pray, unshakable strength of faith, so that all who profess that your Only Begotten Son is with you for ever in your glory and was born of the Virgin Mary in a body truly like our own may be freed from present trials and given a place in abiding gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 2:22-28; Psalm 98:1, 2-3ab, 3cd-4;

John 1:19-28

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, I am not the Christ. They asked him, Then who are

you? Are you Elijah? He said, I am not. Are you the Prophet? He answered, No. Finally they said, Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, Why then do you baptise if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet? I baptise with water, John replied, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising. (John 1: 10-28)

The Manifestation of Christ

The dialogue between the priests and Levites from Jerusalem and John the Baptist shows some of the elements of the expectation which characterized the religion of the chosen people. The religions of the peoples of the ancient world had their myths and ritual that accounted for the beginnings, and it helped them cope with life, both its blessings and its threats. One of the

several distinguishing features of the Hebrew religion was its *expectation*. There was a great Coming which the good Hebrew expected. Not only did he look back to the past when Yahweh saved his people, but he looked to the future when through his Messiah, God would come and both save and judge. With this in mind he prepared accordingly. We remember the elderly Simeon who had been assured by God that he would not see death until he had laid eyes on the Messiah. We remember our Lord telling his disciples that prophets and kings had longed to see what they, his disciples, were now seeing. As said, a distinguishing trait of the revealed religion of the Hebrews was its *expectation*. They expected that God would come to save. They looked to the future. But we also see that there was great haziness as to the details. Scripture gave pointers here and pointers there, and much of it was left without its synthesis. Moses had told the people that the Lord said to him, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen, and will put my words into his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him. If any man will not listen to my words which he speaks in my name, I myself will make him answer for

it” (Deuteronomy 18:18). So another Moses was coming, but who would he be? Most especially, a great Anointed one was expected, the son of David who would sit upon his throne and set his people free. But who would he be? Elijah too must return (Malachi 4:1-5) to anoint and manifest the Messiah. So the visitors asked John, was *he* the Prophet? Was *he* the Messiah? Was *he* Elijah?

These questions posed by the representatives of the highest religious authority manifest the uncertainty and confusion which was present in the chosen people of God. They had much light, but much light was still needed. John denied that *he* was the Prophet. He denied that he was the Christ. He refused the title of Elijah. As a matter of fact, he was the Elijah who was to come, as our Lord made clear to his disciples after his transfiguration. In him the spirit of Elijah had returned, and in him Elijah anointed and manifested the Messiah. As it turned out, all the uncertainty in discerning the true meaning of the Scriptures, all the confusion in interpreting the various figures of the prophecies — the coming Prophet, the coming Elijah, the coming Son

of Man, the coming Suffering Servant, the coming son of David — all these figures were to find their synthesis in the person of Jesus Christ. His appearance in the world resolved the prophecies for those enlightened to grasp this. The whole of the Old Testament now had its unity, a unity found in the person of Christ. The word “Epiphany” means manifestation or appearance. The Epiphany of Jesus Christ — his appearance among men — gives to the world and all of God’s dealings with men their common meaning. We may regard John the Baptist of our Gospel passage today as representing the yearning of the Old Testament as it points to the one who is coming. We may regard him too as representing the human race as it hopes in God for a Solution. “I baptise with water, John replied, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie” (John 1: 10-28). In one single Person we have everything. As St Paul writes, in Christ is found every heavenly blessing. As our Lord himself said, All that the Father has is mine. He who sees me sees the Father. This incomparable Jewel has been manifested to all, and it is God’s free gift to any who approach

him for it. As we prepare to celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord, let us look on Christ as the Treasure manifested to all.

This every Christian should know. But not all appreciate that this brings a responsibility to actively manifest Christ to the world of our everyday life. We must do what John the Baptist does in today's Gospel. We must endeavour to manifest Christ more and more to the world. We ought act as his Epiphany. Let us do so by word and deed, and thus play our part in the world's salvation, for salvation is to be found only in Christ. His is the only name by which men are saved.



Tuesday before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Ps 118 (117): 26-27 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord: The Lord is God and has given us light.

Collect O God, who in the blessed childbearing of the holy Virgin Mary kept the flesh of your Son free from the sentence incurred by the human race, grant, we pray, that we, who have been taken up into this new creation, may be freed from the ancient taint of sin. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 2:29-3:6; Psalm 98:1, 3cd-4, 5-6;
John 1:29-34

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, ‘A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’ I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel.”

John testified further, saying, “I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him. I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.” (John 1:29-34)

John In 1947 a Bedouin Arab shepherd boy found a cave in Qumran near the Dead Sea of Israel. This cave ultimately yielded priceless (biblical and non-biblical) fragments dating back before the death of Jesus Christ. The special discovery was the corpus of biblical manuscripts in Cave Four that contained at least parts of every single book of the Old Testament with the exception of the Book of Esther, and this included multiple copies of several biblical texts. Following the excavation work of Father Roland de Vaux in the 1950s, it is recognized that these finds had been amassed, and stored by the Essenes who lived their communitarian religious life there – the community was there till the Romans arrived in 68 AD. The most complete scroll is

that of the prophet Isaiah, written on 17 sheets of parchment, and perhaps to be dated sometime in the second century BC. It does seem to me that the excellence of the Isaiah manuscripts may suggest a special prominence given by the Essenes to that prophet. Now, it is widely thought by modern scholars that John the Baptist, who as a “child grew and became strong in spirit”, and “was in the wilderness till the day of his appearing in Israel” (Luke 1: 80), spent time with the Essenes. Benedict XVI, in the first volume (p. 14) of his *Jesus of Nazareth: From his Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (2007), subscribes to this view. John’s presence among the Essenes (if a fact) may suggest a special immersion by him in the Book of Isaiah. As it turns out, Matthew quotes a text of the prophet Isaiah as interpretative of the mission of John (3:3). So does Mark (1: 2) and Luke (3: 4). Luke tells us that the word of God came to John *in the wilderness* (3: 2) – perhaps he was with the Essenes, and reading the prophet *Isaiah* when this occurred. At any rate, he then “went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching” (3: 3). What did he say of himself to the emissaries from Jerusalem? He quoted *Isaiah*: “I am the

voice of one crying in the wilderness” (John 1: 23). His mission was to prepare the way for the coming of Another. His glory, though, was to give an extraordinary revelation as to the identity and work of this One who was coming. For this, he used the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. I speculate, but parts of this scroll may have been his special possession during his rigorous life in the environs of the Jordan.

One of the largest of the prophetic Books is that of Isaiah, and compared to him the amount that is recorded of John the Baptist’s words is miniscule. However, inasmuch as so much of the rising crescendo of the Old Testament had to do with the Messiah who was to come, the One through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3), his prophetic statements regarding the Messiah are remarkable. In this respect he dwarfs Isaiah for the sublimity and accuracy of his prophecy. Especially remarkable is what he said as recorded by John the Evangelist, who had been his disciple and intimate. We have some of these words in our Gospel passage today (John 1:29-34). To begin with, he physically points to Jesus of

Nazareth as the One about whom he had spoken and who will make all the difference to the *world* – that is, to *all* the families of the earth. “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*” John has hit on the essential arena of liberation and salvation which will be the object of the Messiah’s mission. It is not liberation of God’s people from physical slavery to a physical abode of freedom and rest, as was the case with Moses. This *new Moses* will liberate the *whole world*, and from *sin* – the worst and most universal form of slavery and oppression. He will fulfil the promise made to Abraham at the beginning (Gen. 12), and will fulfil the promise made to Moses at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3) – which was a type of the wondrous liberation to come. Jesus of Nazareth will save the whole world from sin. No prophet attained this level of prophecy. But there is another grand point – he will do this as *the Lamb of God*. Presumably, carried along by an inspired insight, John’s mind and heart had been filled with the allusion of Isaiah to the Suffering Servant who is like a lamb led to the slaughter. “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep

that before its shearers is dumb ... by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities ... yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53). John had been granted the insight that Jesus was the Suffering Servant who would atone for and take away the sins of the world. John was, then, as nothing before him.

But there is more recorded for us. John declares that “*the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.*” There is thus more on the mission of Jesus Christ. Not only will he take away the sin of the world, but he will also baptize with the Holy Spirit. There is also more on who Jesus of Nazareth really is: he is “the Son of God.” John was speaking under divine inspiration, and we remember how when Simon Peter declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, our Lord said that this had been revealed to

him by the Father in heaven (Matthew 16:17). So too with John the Baptist – but this was at the threshold of Christ’s public ministry, and without John having seen any of it nor heard Christ’s teaching. It is little wonder that Christ our Lord regarded him so very highly.

Wednesday before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Is 9:1 A people who walked in darkness has seen a great light; for those dwelling in a land of deep gloom, a light has shone.

Collect Grant us, almighty God, that the bringer of your salvation, who for the world’s redemption came forth with newness of heavenly light, may dawn afresh in our hearts and bring us constant renewal. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 3:7-10; Psalm 98:1, 7-8, 9; John 1:35-42

John was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon. Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. He first found his own brother Simon and told him, "We have found the Messiah," which is translated Christ. Then he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas," which is translated Peter. (John 1:35-42)

Simon Peter There is a striking passage that appears well into the Gospel of St Matthew. In it, our Lord speaks of his founding his "Church" upon "this rock" (*Petros*) which is Simon. It follows Simon Peter's profession of faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the

living God. Our Lord has an intense public ministry behind him in which he has spent himself in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and by implication himself as the Anointed King, the Messiah. The question was, had the people recognized and accepted this? With his all-important Passion and Death ahead of him, he turns to his disciples with the question: *Who do you say I am?* He instantly receives the perfect answer from Simon, and thereupon Christ announced the coming formation of his Church (16: 18-19). Significantly, Simon would be its “rock” – a word reminiscent of one of the titles of Yahweh, the Rock of his chosen people. The Greek that is given for Simon’s new title is a masculine form of the feminine *petra* for “rock”. Peter, as the “rock” of Christ’s Church, is to receive the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is traditionally understood that Matthew’s Gospel was originally composed in Aramaic or Hebrew for a Jewish-convert readership, and then translated into common Greek for a much wider circulation. Simon’s new title given to him by our Lord is, then, a Greek translation of either the original Aramaic or the Hebrew – presumably it was the commonly spoken Aramaic. Now, we notice that

this formal conferring of the title (of office) on Simon occurs, in Matthew, well into the public ministry – just before the Transfiguration and with the Passion in sight. But it is not the first mention of this title in Matthew, for we read how – earlier, but well into his public ministry – our Lord called the Twelve to him and gave them special powers and a mission. At the head of the group is “first, *Simon, who is called Peter*” (10: 2). This does not explicitly say that Simon was *first* given the title *then*. But if we turn to the next Gospel, that of St Mark, we get the similar impression that Christ gave to Simon his title early in his public ministry when he formally called the Twelve. In Mark 3: 16, we read that “he went up into the hills, and called to him those whom he desired; Simon *whom he surnamed Peter*”. Likewise, in the third Gospel, that of Luke, this incident occurs in Ch. 6: 13-14. We read that “when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles; Simon, *whom he named Peter*.”

But as a matter of fact, in the Gospel of St John we discover something unexpected. At the very threshold of his public ministry,

and before its actual commencement, Christ told Simon in the presence of his first two disciples (Andrew and John) that he, Simon, would receive this name. Indeed, we are given the Aramaic (or Hebrew) word originally used by our Lord on that occasion. It subsequently passed into the common usage of the infant Church, for we find St Paul using it when referring to Peter in some of his Letters. The term is $\kappa\eta\phi\tilde{\alpha}\varsigma$, which is not John's Greek translation of the Aramaic word, *K/Cephas*, but his *transliteration* of it. He wished to report our Lord's *very words* and the dignity Simon had from the beginning of his association with Jesus Christ before the public ministry even began – so revered was Simon Peter in the early Church, and so special was his title. Simon, we learn from John's Gospel, was the first one brought to our Lord by Andrew his brother, one of the two who had been prompted to follow him by John the Baptist. John, presumably the other one of the original two, writes that our Lord said to Simon on that unforgettable occasion, "*You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas,*" which is *translated Peter* (John 1: 42). This is one of the few texts of the New Testament where Christ's title for Simon is given as a *transliteration* of

the original vernacular – the other texts are those of St Paul when he refers to *Cephas*. It is to be noticed that in this passage John gives us two other original words that were used on this occasion, here transliterated into Greek: *Rabbi* and *Messiah*, both of which John *then translates* for the Greek reader. Now, what does this show? The formal conferring of Simon’s title in the Gospel of St Matthew (Ch. 16) marks a new development in our Lord’s teaching. The *Church* is introduced as the locale of the Kingdom, and as the means of its access. The keys to it are to be held by Simon “the rock”. Indeed, Matthew’s report of Christ’s intention to found a *Church* (with Simon as its “rock”) is one of the very few references to the *Church* in the Gospels. John’s mention of Simon’s future title on the threshold of Christ’s ministry (John 1:42) shows that the *Church* was on Christ’s mind from the *beginning*. The Church was not a future development of Christ’s teaching which he introduced not long before the Passion. Indirectly, it was *alluded* to by Jesus Christ before his ministry began. Reading this, we are reminded of the central role of the Church in the Kingdom of God.

We are at this point preparing for the celebration of the Epiphany, a word which means the *manifestation* of Jesus Christ. Above all, we think of him as, in the words of John the Baptist in today's Gospel, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But Christ's allusion to Simon's future title at the end of this passage, a detail which John the Evangelist is at pains to include, reminds us that the *Church* is God's vehicle for *manifesting* the redemptive work of his divine Son to the world. The Church which Christ would found, with Simon the "rock" at its head, is an essential part of the plan of God for the redemption and sanctification of the world.



Thursday before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Cf. John 1:1 In the beginning and before all ages, the Word was God and he humbled himself to be born the Saviour of the world.

Collect O God, who by the Nativity of your Only Begotten Son wondrously began for your people the work of redemption, grant, we pray, to your servants such firmness of faith, that by his guidance they may attain the glorious prize you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 3:11-21; Psalm 100:1b-2, 3, 4, 5;
John 1:43-51

Jesus decided to go to Galilee, and he found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the town of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets, Jesus,

son of Joseph, from Nazareth.” But Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Here is a true child of Israel. There is no duplicity in him.” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this.” And he said to him, “Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (John 1:43-51)

Faith There are many things in the first chapter of St John’s Gospel that are remarkable. The first thing, of course, is the Prologue in which the divinity of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, is clearly stated. His distinct personhood from the Father and his equality with the Father as God is also momentous. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word

was with God and the Word was God ... all things were made through him.” The inspired statements of John the Baptist about Jesus are likewise remarkable and constitute the zenith of the prophecies of Scripture about the One who was coming. “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world ... this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit ... he is the Son of God”. Let us ponder on another notable thing that can be easily missed. I refer to the extraordinary speed and immediacy with which our Lord’s first disciples attained faith in him, following Christ’s baptism yet before his public ministry actually began. Christ’s first two disciples were prompted by John the Baptist to follow him – and they stayed with him the rest of that day. The next day Andrew, one of the two, had no hesitation in telling his brother Simon that “we have found the Messiah” – and he brought him to Jesus. So Andrew and the other one of the original two, together with Simon the brother of Andrew, at this early stage arrived at a firm faith in Jesus as the Christ. No miracle had been worked – it was all a result of personal contact, together with the testimony of John the Baptist. That had been sufficient for them. In our Gospel passage for

today (John 1:43-51), this feature of the story continues with the focus on two more of Christ's original disciples. The passage opens with "the next day", when Jesus resolved to return to Galilee. He "found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me'." Like the previous three, Philip's response was immediate – he was now a committed disciple of the promised Messiah. As proof of this, we find him (presumably on that same day) going to Nathanael and telling him what Andrew had told his brother Simon. "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth" (John 1:45). This immediate and life-long commitment to Jesus of each of these gives pause for thought. How did it happen? Well, let us observe the exchange between Nathanael and Jesus.

It looks as if the inspired John relished the memory of Nathanael's arrival on the scene – specifically his response to the news brought to him by Philip, and his subsequent meeting with Jesus. Philip told him that they had found the Messiah, and that he was "*Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.*" The detail about Jesus being a native of

Nazareth did not look good to Nathanael. He must not have had a favourable impression of that place, for he asked if “anything *good*” could come from there – *anything* good! So we may say that Nathanael had mixed feelings in following along after Philip to meet this new Man. Perhaps because of this our Lord deigned to work a small miracle for his benefit at their first meeting. He revealed to him that *he had been watching him*, before Philip called him, *while he was under the fig tree*. Something altogether significant must have been happening there – perhaps something to do with Nathanael and the promised Messiah, who knows! We remember how it had been revealed to Simeon that he would not see death till he had seen the Messiah (Luke 2: 26). Had Nathanael, under the fig tree, been praying for the blessing of seeing the Messiah – or something else to do with the promised One announced by John the Baptist? The miraculous reference by Jesus to an event so personal to Nathanael brought to the fore Nathanael’s best and indeed superb qualities. He instantly attained a great faith in Jesus, declaring him to be “the Son of God ... the King of Israel”. St John’s Gospel was all about embracing this very creed (John 20:31), and Nathanael gained

this faith at the very first meeting (John 1: 49). How are we to account for this remarkably good and rapid faith, on first meeting? It was a feature of each of our Lord's first disciples. Of course, we must remember that John the Baptist's ministry had been focussed on announcing that the One promised was soon to appear – indeed that he was, unknown to all, *already in the midst of the people*. “Among you stands one whom you do not know ... the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie”. So there must have been an expectation that somewhere *among* them was the One to come. But there was more to their lively faith than this, because many never attained the belief they had. It was this: they had the right dispositions and moral character.

We are given an important clue to this in what our Lord said of the disciple who was following in train after Philip. *Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Here is a true child of Israel. There is no duplicity in him.”* If there was one thing our Lord denounced in religious leaders it was duplicity and guile. He flayed many (not all) of the scribes and Pharisees for this, calling them

hypocrites and blind guides. John the Baptist called them a brood of vipers. Here he praises Nathanael for his guilelessness. He was a man who loved the truth and who lived truthfully, without dissimulation, pretence or religious hypocrisy. He was profoundly open to the truth when it came before him, and there now stood before him the One who was the Way, the *Truth* and the Life. He, Jesus, had come to bear witness to the Truth and those who were of the truth listened to his voice – as he told Pilate. So it was that Nathanael attained instant faith. Let us learn from this beautiful example to be good soil for the word of God, and produce a harvest.



Friday before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Psalm 112 (111): 4 A light has risen in the darkness for the upright of heart; the Lord is generous, merciful and just.

Collect Cast your kindly light upon your faithful, Lord, we pray, and with the splendour of your glory set their hearts ever aflame, that they may never cease to acknowledge their Saviour and may truly hold fast to him. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 5:5-13; Psalm 147:12-13, 14-15, 19-20;
Mark 1:7-11 or Luke 3:23-38

When Jesus began his ministry he was about thirty years of age. He was the son, as was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Sala, the son of Nahshon, the son of Amminadab, the son of Admin,

the son of Arni, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God. (Luke 3:23, 31-34, 36, 38)

or

This is what John the Baptist proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:7-11)

Jesus The three “synoptic” Gospels, as they are called (Matthew, Mark and Luke), have that title because of their similarities. The Gospel of St John is very different from them. But one of the intriguing differences between say, Matthew and Luke, is the genealogies of Jesus Christ provided by them – and today we have Luke’s to ponder. I remember watching a video talk by a leading Australian Scripture scholar. He more or less dismissed the two genealogies as of little or no historical value. I do not accept this, and inasmuch as we have before us the genealogy of St Luke, it is worth our while considering them. To begin with, we are not told what are the traditions and sources on which each author based his genealogy, so it is a waste of time endeavouring to hunt around for them. But certain thoughts occur from a mere reading of each text. It is manifest that Matthew’s Infancy narrative has a bent towards *Joseph* as the head of the Holy Family. Accordingly, he traces the genealogy of Jesus Christ from Abraham through King David to “Joseph, the husband of Mary of whom Jesus was born”. Thus he shows that through *Joseph* Jesus is the son and heir of David and his throne. One may assume, then, that Matthew had got hold of a

genealogy of *Joseph's* line, and used it to make various theological points – and that is not our interest here. We are looking at *Luke's* genealogy. Luke, from whom our passage today is drawn (Luke 3:23, 31-34, 36, 38), shows a singular interest in Mary in his Infancy narrative. He has so much material in this initial section of his Gospel which could only have come from her, in some sense. While Matthew has shown by his genealogy that Joseph is a son of David, and that by virtue of his headship of the family Jesus himself inherits this title, what is to be said of Mary the mother of Jesus? What we do have here is the word of the Angel Gabriel which seems to imply a Davidic ancestry. It is true that Luke, in introducing Mary to whom the Angel Gabriel will soon appear to make his announcement, mentions that she “was betrothed to a man named Joseph of the house of David.” But in the momentous words the Angel then addresses to *Mary*, Joseph her betrothed does not get so much as a look-in. Nor does his Davidic ancestry. The angelic focus is simply on *Mary and her divine Child*. Let us observe one detail in what he says to her of him. It suggests things about her ancestry.

The Angel declares that “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give to him the throne of *his father David*, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1: 32-33). So, the Child’s “father” is *David* – and it is *Mary* whom the Angel is addressing, Mary who is not yet married. Joseph is not yet the Child’s (foster) father. I am speculating, but this seems to imply that Mary is a descendant of David. Luke has already told us that Joseph is of the house of David, and now (so it seems to me) he is telling us that the Angel speaks to Mary, *whose father is David*, announcing that her son will inherit David’s throne and occupy it forever. Now, what has this to do with our Gospel today? It suggests to me that Luke’s genealogy (given at the commencement of Jesus’ public life) is one that relates to Mary, also of the house of David – even though it begins, after Jesus, with Joseph mentioned as his “supposed” father (Luke 3: 23). Perhaps Luke learnt of the genealogy from her – just as Matthew may have learnt of Joseph’s genealogy from Mary. Though they agree only on a handful of names, the two genealogies are not unlike from Abraham to David,

but diverge from David to Jesus. Matthew gives us a line that passes from David to Joseph *through Solomon*, but in Luke, David reaches Jesus *through Nathan*, the “son of David”. In any case, just as Matthew structured his material to make certain points, so did Luke. One is that Matthew, beginning with Abraham and passing through David to Jesus, shows that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Promise made to Abraham and renewed with David. Whereas Luke begins with Jesus in the maturity of his manhood (at about 30 years of age), and takes us back to *Adam* the father of the human race. Jesus is, then, the Saviour of the human race and the Second Adam. As Adam was the “son of God” being directly created by him in his image (Genesis 1:27), so is Jesus the Son of God, but superlatively so and by his very nature. He is the only-begotten of the Father and the Image of the unseen God. He is the fulfilment of the Promise made not just to Abraham and David, but to the Man and the Woman in the Garden and to the Serpent who beguiled them. “He will crush your head” (Genesis 3:15), the Serpent was told. Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of the world, and will regenerate a new life to fill and renew all mankind.

Luke starts his genealogy with Jesus. Jesus is at the forefront, standing out ahead of all who have preceded him from Adam. In Luke's presentation, our gaze begins with Jesus, and we look behind him over his shoulder, as it were, and see the concourse of people who preceded him back into the distant past, back to Adam. He is their descendant and their Leader. He is the head of the human race, just as he is of the chosen people. There he stands at the threshold of his public ministry which will culminate in his saving death. He has the greatest work of all human history to do, which is to take away the sin of the world and to fill the hearts of all his brothers with a share in his Holy Spirit. Let us take our stand with him then, and never leave his side.



Saturday before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Gal 4: 4-5 God sent his Son, born of a woman, so that we might receive adoption as children.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who were pleased to shine forth with new light through the coming of your Only Begotten Son, grant, we pray, that, just as he was pleased to share our bodily form through the childbearing of the Virgin Mary, so we, too, may one day merit to become companions in his kingdom of grace. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 5:14-21; Psalm 149:1-5; John 2:1-11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Dear woman, why do you involve me" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come." His mother said to the

servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.” They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.” This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. (John 2:1-11)

New Adam, New Eve One of the things which strikes one about the first chapter of the Gospel of St John is its hearkening back to the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. Its very opening is so very similar to that of the Book of Genesis. John writes: “In the beginning was the

Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things were made through him.” At the commencement of the Book of Genesis we read, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... And God said, ‘let there be light’, and there was light”. So there is God at the beginning, and then we are introduced to his creative word. God created the light – and John tells us in his Prologue that the Word of God is the light and life of every man. There is a further similarity. The first chapter of Genesis sets the activity of God and his word in the framework of *seven days* – a working week with its Sabbath rest. In John’s Gospel, at the threshold of the public appearance of the incarnate Word (1:19), there is the framework of “days” in which things happen. The opening scene of John pointing to the One “whom you do not know” is clearly the *first day*. It is followed by “the *next day*” when John points to Jesus as the Lamb of God. The “*next day*” after this, our Lord’s first three disciples meet him and commit themselves to him. Then the “*next day*” two more disciples join our Lord definitively. That gives us the first four “days”. At the beginning of the next chapter (Ch. 2 – the division into chapters and verses is a late

innovation), we have our passage for today (John 2: 1-11). This occurred, we read, on “the *third day*”. Now, inasmuch as this scene is in *Cana of Galilee*, one presumes that John means that this is the “third day” after the previous “*day*”, which is to say, three days after the our Lord’s meeting with Philip and Nathanael and his departure for Galilee (1: 43-51). This event of the wedding feast of Cana, then, brings the week of “days” to a completion – for this occurs on the seventh day. It would seem that John understands a *new creation* to be now under way, a parallel to the Genesis seven-day work of creation. The very miracle which occurs on this seventh day involves a new creation, for water is changed into wine. It is a portent, a “sign” of all that is to come. But there is another parallel with Genesis. In the second chapter of Genesis there is God’s creation of “the man” and “the woman”. This focus on the Man and the Woman is captured in our Gospel passage today.

I propose that in reading our Gospel passage today, we bear in mind the broad parallel with Genesis that I have suggested. More specifically, the backdrop of Genesis suggests not only that a new

creation is now beginning with the public work of Christ, but that Jesus himself is the new Adam, and that Mary his mother is the new Eve. He is the Man and she is the Woman. In the Book of Genesis, the Woman having sinned approaches the Man to draw him away from God with her. Her influence with him is obvious. In our Gospel passage, Mary approaches Jesus, and her influence with him is also obvious. But with her it is an influence to begin the work of God *now*. Moreover, we notice how he addresses her. She is “Woman” – suggesting that she is the new Eve, and he the new Adam. Of course, as has been often pointed out, this term does not carry the cold and even disrespectful connotation that it would if used as an English mode of address now. But John – as a witness to the event – had in mind a higher theological dimension, for the event revealed who Jesus was. It was the first “sign” of his special glory. It also revealed the power and grandeur of the Woman, his mother. She, the new Eve, was the *mother* of all the living and of all those who would live in Christ – and here she was exercising a motherly solicitude for the wedding couple and guests. We notice the exquisite observation of Mary and the effectiveness of her

intercession. The couple at the centre of the wedding celebration did not know their need, and perhaps few were aware of the sudden cause of great concern. They had no more wine. Notice the implicit approval by Mary of the very celebrations, and of the wine being able to flow freely among the guests. These things were good and God smiled on it all – hence the immediate concern of Mary when things began to take an unexpected turn. Without anyone asking her to do so, she approached her Son with the need. He would know what to do and certainly had the power to do it. It would seem that she expected a miracle – she knew that it had not been his intention to begin his public manifestation at this particular moment. Perhaps she thought that in fact the opportunity had been providentially provided. “They have no wine”, she simply said to him – and John the Evangelist remembered it well. With that, the Messiah acted in quiet, simple and effective fashion. A word of direction was given to the servants and suddenly the celebration found itself with an extraordinary abundance of the best possible wine. It was a *new creation*. The next time John reports Christ

addressing his mother as “Woman” would be from the Cross, when he entrusted his beloved disciple (and all of us) to her as *Mother* (19: 26).

This was not just a portent of the future infusion of divine grace into the wonderful human reality of marriage. It manifested the glory of the divine Redeemer of man. A new beginning was taking place, for the world would be renewed, made new. The results of sin and alienation from God are well summed up, symbolically, in Mary’s words: “They have no wine!” Of ourselves, we too will find ourselves with no wine. Let us turn to the Woman, the new Eve, the true *mother of all the living*, the mother of those who have been redeemed by Christ her Son and ask her to approach him with all our needs. Holy Mary! Mother of God! Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. How beautiful is the thought of Mary our mother ever going to Christ and presenting our needs to him just as she did at the wedding feast of Cana. Let us ask her to do this all through our lives, right to the end at the moment of our death.



The Epiphany of the Lord

At the Vigil Mass

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Bar 5: 5 Arise, Jerusalem, and look to the East and see your children gathered from the rising to the setting of the sun.

Collect May the splendour of your majesty, O Lord, we pray, shed its light upon our hearts, that we may pass through the shadows of this world and reach the brightness of our eternal home. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

At the Mass During the Day

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mal 3: 1; 1 Chr 29: 12 Behold, the Lord, the Mighty One, has come; and kingship is in his grasp, and power and dominion.

Collect O God, who on this day revealed your Only Begotten Son to the nations by the guidance of a star, grant in your mercy, that we, who know you already by faith, may be brought to behold the beauty of your sublime glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8. 10 11, 12-13;
Ephesians 3:2-3.5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you

will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2: 1-12)

The Christian Mission We are in the special liturgical season of Christmas when we think of the gift to the world of our Redeemer. A Redeemer has come and is now always to be with us. As we put ourselves back in those first days at Bethlehem, we think of how the

promise of God was fulfilled. God had promised his chosen people that he would send to them a Messiah who would shepherd his people. He would be the Good Shepherd long predicted. And now the Messiah had come. But there was something more. This promised Messiah was not only for God's own chosen people. He was for all the nations. He was for the world. And this is powerfully suggested in the events recorded in the Gospel. When our Lord was born, it was to Jewish shepherds that the angels announced the news. But the Gospel records that soon after, pagan wise men from the East were led by a star to the promised king. Both groups represented the two worlds, the Jewish and the non-Jewish. Both were to be offered the salvation Christ would bring. It is the whole non-Jewish world, of which all of us are members, that we think of today. When the angels appeared to the shepherds, the whole night sky was filled with light. When the star appeared to the wise men from the east there was less light, but light there was. Both together symbolise the light of the Gospel shining upon all nations, Jewish and Gentile. The star leading the wise men to the infant Jesus was an external sign leading to him. Faith is the light that enlightens our hearts

with the truth of Christ the Redeemer. This light of faith is a wonderful gift from God which we take for granted all too easily. It is this light of faith which has gone out to all the nations, and in most Sunday Mass congregations in Australia, numerous nations are represented. They have received the light of faith which we celebrate today, the feast of the Epiphany.

In the second reading, St. Paul, full of joy, is speaking of the secret, long hidden, that through Christ, the Chosen People were now to be given many brothers from among the Gentiles. Through the Gospel, we too share in the blessings of the prophets and the promises and the Messiah. We are all part of God's Chosen People on the way to salvation. The proclamation of the Gospel is the new star shining in the life of the Church. It is by our faith that we are able to accept it, and the Gospel is able to lead all peoples to Christ and the glory of heaven. This is particularly relevant for today. We are called to send the light of the Gospel to the whole world, calling all men and women to follow Christ. We have inherited the role of the wise men who gave

a shining example of fidelity in following the star of faith. In the Gospel account, the wise men from the East revealed the coming of Christ even to the Jewish people, whose faith had dimmed. Our life should be like a star leading others to Christ. The faith has been carried through the world and through the centuries not just by missionaries, but by the movement and migration of many peoples. Australia has been greatly enriched by deeply committed Christians from other countries who have made their home among us. We must make sure that our star shines brightly in our families and in society. Let us examine ourselves. Does the light of my faith shine brightly with good deeds, love and charity? Let us call on our noblest impulses to raise high the light of our faith to all. We have a duty to Christ our eternal King. Let us this year make Christian family life shine forth like a star of faith, like the star shining for the wise men.

Let us think of what the Christ Child, before whom the pagan wise men would bow in veneration, would say to his disciples years later, in his risen and glorified manhood just before he ascended into

heaven. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all I have commanded you. Behold, I am with you till the end of the world."

A Second Reflection for the Feast of the Epiphany

The Star of Faith The word 'Epiphany' means manifestation. We celebrate today the manifestation of our Lord to the first non-Jews who sought out Christ so as to do him homage. This is *our* feast day, for those wise men represented *us*. The star which the astrologers from the east followed was an external sign which supported their faith and led them on to Christ. In our following of Christ we, of course, do not follow an external star. But there is a star within, the star of our faith leading us to Christ. This light of our faith is a most privileged gift of God, of far more value and importance than any signs and wonders of an external kind. Recall how Jesus used to censure his fellow Jews when they kept pressing him for signs. Jesus declared that they would be given only the sign of Jonah, and that was an allusion to his death

and resurrection. Our Lord was continually looking for *faith* and praising it. Faith is a light from God himself. We remember how, when Simon Peter declared to our Lord that he was the Christ the Son of God, our Lord said that flesh and blood had not revealed this to him but the Father in heaven. His faith was a light from God. As we hear the word of God read and preached each time we go to Mass, we must listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit if we are to grow in faith. Faith is the true light of life, and it comes from God and only from God. It is this light that leads to God, as we see in the case of the three wise men who clearly had a form of faith (Matthew 2:1-12). We travel through life following the light of faith in our minds and the light of love in our hearts. What the three wise men did is repeated over and over again in those seeking Christ or seeking to do his will.

But there is a most important implication in this. Today we are not just thinking of the fact that Christ has been given to all humanity, and not just to the Jews. We have a part to play in this. We are called to bring the light of faith to all men and women, a light which calls

them to follow Christ. We have inherited the role of the wise men who gave a shining example of fidelity in following this star. Let us notice that the faith of the wise men, lit by their own holy yearning, revealed the coming of Christ even to some of the Jewish people, whose faith had dimmed. Some responded wickedly. Others responded with joy, as did the shepherds, and as did Simeon and Anna following the birth of the Child. Let each of us be aware that our life ought be a star of faith leading others to Christ. The faith has been carried throughout the world, not just by missionaries, but by the migration of many believers, ordinary lay men and women. Now, hundreds of millions of these stars of faith shine around the world, offering the opportunity to many others to come to know the Redeemer. Let us examine ourselves on this day, the feast of the Epiphany which brings us near the end of Christmastide, and ask, does the light of my faith shine brightly? The light of our faith will not be bright if it does not shine with love and good deeds, especially those good deeds which lead others to Christ. There are so many ways whereby Christ's faithful may bring the light of faith to others. This faith is above all faith in the Eucharistic Jesus, the Jesus of

the sacraments and the Jesus who is the head of the Church his body. Our treasure is the person of Jesus and our faith in him. Let our life's work be to bring this treasure to the world.

Each of us has a star to lead us to Jesus, and it is above all the star of our faith which is our share in the faith of the Church. It takes us to Jesus who is head of his body the Church. Not only do we have this star as God's gift, we have the calling to be a star for others, leading them to faith in Christ the Saviour. Let us take up our grand vocation which is to be a light leading to the Light.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.512 519
(The Christian Mission)



Monday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon A holy day has dawned upon us: Come, you nations, and adore the Lord, for a great light has come down upon the earth.

Collect O God, whose eternal Word adorns the face of the heavens yet accepted from the Virgin Mary the frailty of our flesh, grant, we pray, that he who appeared among us as the splendour of truth may go forth in the fullness of power for the redemption of the world. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 3:22-4:6; Psalm 2:7bc-8, 10-12a;
Matthew 4:12-17.23-25

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, Jesus went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali - to fulfil what was said through the prophet Isaiah: Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,

the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles - the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. From that time on Jesus began to preach, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. (Matthew 4:12-17. 23-25)

The Light in the Darkness

During these weekdays immediately following the Epiphany, which is to say *the manifestation* of Christ at his *infancy*, we are given flashes of the later *public* manifestation of Christ that will come. This *public epiphany* began with the sudden eclipse of John's ministry when he was imprisoned by Herod. John had

announced to the nation that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. All were to prepare the way for the Lord by repentance, for the Messiah himself was nigh. John identified Jesus as being he, and made it known. Soon after, he denounced Herod to his face for his marital situation, and was gaoled. With that, John's public ministry ceased, but the mantle had been handed on to the Prophet who would far surpass him. Jesus forthwith returns to his native Galilee and begins his public ministry. He is shown to be a great light. The prophet Isaiah had said that "at first he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future *he will honour Galilee by the way of the sea, along the Jordan*" (8:23). The fulfilment of this prediction came with Jesus who *honoured Galilee* by his long presence and his public ministry. St Matthew recalls the words of the prophet, "*Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has dawned*" (9:1). Jesus is that expected Light, and our Lord himself would use this metaphor. *I am the Light of the world*, he said. He who follows me walks in the light,

and he who refuses walks in the darkness. St John in his Prologue writes that in him was life and that life was the light of men, a light that shines in the darkness, a darkness that cannot master it. So the Epiphany or manifestation of Christ to the world that occurred in principle with the arrival of the Wise Men from the East pointed to the great manifestation of Christ later. This would be firstly to the chosen people in our Gospel passage today and secondly to the world in the missionary work of the Church. John stayed in Judea and in certain confined locations. The people came to him. But Jesus "went throughout Galilee" ("Galilee of the Gentiles/nations") and "news about him spread all over Syria" and "large crowds" came to him from all over.

What is striking is that the end of John's ministry is like a trumpet sound for the immediate beginning of another. Christ shows no gradual preparation for his all-consuming mission. He immediately starts with tremendous intensity, and the light of his Person and teaching bursts out with absolute confidence. It is an immediate

manifestation, a sudden Epiphany. He went "teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." That is to say, the manifestation of Christ to the chosen people and to the world was the divine plan from the very beginning. Christ did not just begin a religious movement and leave the rest to the unfolding circumstances of history. Christianity is not a world religion by historical accident. While not tampering with human freedom, God means Christ and his revelation to be not merely one world religion, but *the* religion of the world. From the very beginning, from Christ's very entry into life, he was meant to be manifested to every man and woman coming into the world. This is a pattern we see from the beginning of our Lord's public life. We see in his ministry and in the people coming to him an indicator of what is to come – his relationship with the *entire world*, just as the visit of the pagan Magi was symbolic of this too. So, "people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the

Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region *across the Jordan* followed him" (Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25). We have here a pattern of epiphanies – manifestations. In his first Epiphany, Christ was manifested to the pagan Magi. He was manifested in his public ministry to the chosen people. It is the divine intention that he be manifested as the Saviour to all the nations, to each one of us and to every man and woman in the world. Such is the divine plan.

What this means is that we have a responsibility to Christ every day. It is a responsibility, not only for our own personal relationship with him, but for the manifestation of him to others. We share in Christ's mission to bring him to the peoples. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. He is the firstborn from the dead, and the salvation of the world depends on its recognition of Jesus Christ as the light of every man. Let us strive to bring this light to all around us.



Tuesday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Ps 118 (117):26-27 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord: The Lord is God and has given us light.

Collect O God, whose Only Begotten Son has appeared in our very flesh, grant, we pray, that we may be inwardly transformed through him whom we recognize as outwardly like ourselves. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 4:7 10; Psalm 72:1 2, 3 4, 7 8; Mark 6:34 44

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. This is a remote place, they said, and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat. But he answered, You give them something to eat. They said to him, That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend

that much on bread and give it to them to eat? How many loaves do you have? he asked. Go and see. When they found out, they said, Five — and two fish. Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand. (Mark 6:34-44)

Happiness As we think of the surging sea of humanity ebbing and flowing from generation to generation, the great issue of happiness rises before our minds. All living things aspire to happiness in some sense and according to their measure, understood as the fulfilment of their nature. The plant "aspires" – if we may speak in metaphor – to fullness of growth and to produce its fruit and its flower. The animal

unreflectingly seeks its happiness in the fulfilment of its various impulses. Above all, man – the crown of visible creation – seeks to be happy. This too involves his fulfilment – the fulfilment of the various needs and aspirations of his rational and physical nature. He instinctively aspires to be happy, and yet the course of life never brings all the happiness for which he mysteriously longs. It brings a certain fulfilment but never its completion, and often – with this or that individual – life is profoundly frustrating. So constant is this issue in the life of man, that many thinkers have considered that the attainment of what is deemed to make one happy is the entire purpose of life. It is insisted that man must be free to choose what will be most conducive to his happiness. Certain philosophers have reduced morality to that which is most useful in bringing the most happiness. Such a position is philosophically very questionable, and there are difficulties with it even from the merely practical point of view. How difficult it is to calculate what will bring one the most happiness! So many factors are constantly at work favouring or undermining, as the case may be, the shifting sands of happiness. A young royal marries a fine girl and that

royal's nation is filled with joy at the prospects ahead. Then gradually, one tragedy follows upon another and the marriage becomes not bliss but an ongoing test of heroic fidelity. It was impossible to have foreseen or even avoided this. Simply *aiming to be "happy"* cannot be the formal goal of life, nor can it be the foundation of duty, although the fulfilment of duty promises its happiness.

In our Gospel today, "when Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." Is not that crowd a picture in minuscule of mankind searching for happiness? The crowd hurries to Jesus with its sick, its burdens and its worries. There is so much that tears at its heart and weighs it down. Jesus, they think, will give us relief. At the sight of this crowd our Lord is filled with compassion, and this is the attitude of the Son of God made man to each and every man and woman in human history, including you and me. But notice, in this scene he does not answer *all* their needs. How great and varied must have been the needs of such a concourse of people! Instead, he set himself to teach them

many things and at some length. He was teaching them what God above all wanted them to have – a share in his kingdom, which was none other than union with his Son Jesus Christ. At the end of his discourse, and the implication is that our Lord's teaching was lengthy, he did proceed to work a spectacular miracle. He fed the crowds as much as they wanted with a mere handful of food. Their physical needs were satisfied to the extent that was necessary. But he did not answer *all* their needs. Filled with compassion for them as he was, Christ knew that their true happiness would come from a different source. It would come from receiving into their hearts with faith and obedience that about which he was teaching in his discourse. All this is to say that the Gospel scene of today (Mark 6: 34–44) is yet another reminder of what is the true source of happiness for man. Man's happiness comes not from loaves but from the Word, the Word of God made flesh for our salvation. We can make loaves the goal of our life, or we can accept Christ as our life. God can give us loaves if he judges it to be in our best interest, but loaves cannot of themselves be our happiness. The ever present danger for man is that he will seek his happiness in loaves

and fishes. But no. His true happiness is to be found in fulfilling his duty of union with God, and this is found in union with and obedience to Christ.

Let us come to God with all our needs – for, after all, this is what the crowd did in our Gospel today, and Christ was full of compassion for them. Let us learn from the passage, though, that our deepest need is for Christ and his teaching. It is in this that our happiness will be found. Where is Christ? He is present above all and in all his fullness in the Holy Eucharist. To this too, the miracle of the loaves and fishes points. Let us make him our life, for as St Paul writes, now not I but Christ lives in me.



Wednesday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Is 9:1 A people who walked in darkness has seen a great light; for those dwelling in a land of deep gloom, a light has shone.

Collect O God, who bestow light on all the nations, grant your peoples the gladness of lasting peace and pour into our hearts that brilliant light by which you purified the minds of our fathers in faith. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 4:11-18; Psalm 72:1-2, 10, 12-13;
Mark 6:45-52

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against

them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened. (Mark 6: 45-52)

Signs of His Glory One of the many notable characteristics of the modern secular era is its many sided scepticism in respect to miracles. It is one aspect of the modern scientific interest in the laws of the material world. There is a good side to this inasmuch as it is unlikely that, at least in the public and civil domain, spurious religious claims of miraculous events will be accepted. There is a sense in which scepticism is healthy. What the scepticism characteristic of modern secularism amounts to, though, is a deep *reluctance* to admit *any* claim to miracles. It can spring from a presumption that the visible world is

all there is. Alternatively, those who admit a supernatural realm and who allow for a Supreme Being, may still be resistant to anything miraculous because of an iron assumption that this great Being only acts in and through the natural laws of his creation. Again, they tend to regard miracles as being, in any case, trivial in significance. Miracles are somewhat like tricks and in a certain sense lack substance. They are not given weight – and the public attitude to the requirement of miracles by the Church to complete the process of beatification and canonization is an instance of this. What I am saying is that a culture that is strongly predisposed in this direction needs to be aware of its prejudice so as to take proper account of the action of God in, say, Scripture and in particular in the Gospels. Christ worked many miracles, and the secular denomination of him as a "miracle worker" often has a dismissive character. By contrast, the period prior to the age of modern science and technology *expected* that God would act miraculously – which is to say, outside the normal laws of nature. Each age has its tendency, and each age must take account of its prejudices in considering the objective facts and their significance for life. We of the modern period will tend

to disregard miracles as probably being spurious or trivial. In respect to Scripture, and in particular the Gospels, we will tend not to contemplate their significance enough.

That having been said, let us turn to our Gospel passage today (Mark 6: 45-52). Let us place ourselves not in the position of modern secular man, sceptical as he tends to be in respect to the reality and value of miracles, but in the position of the Apostles in the boat out in the midst of the storm. It has been a long and busy day, with large crowds, with Jesus teaching them at some length, and finally with a striking miracle of Christ feeding them all with a handful of food. The Apostles were doubtlessly weary and – at our Lord's direction – immediately at the end of it they set out across the Sea of Tiberius. But it was not to be the end of the long day, for all night they had to row with the wind against them. The Greek reads that they were in distress. But lo! Jesus, seeing them in their plight, took to the water himself. He strode steadily on its surface, amid the contrary wind and the heaving waves. Calmly he moved on, rising and falling with the

surface, sprays of water beating against him, his garments and hair responding to the gusts that swirled about him. Strength and tranquillity glowed in his features, and his stride was steady. Power and kindness exuded from his figure. Perhaps the moon lit up the vast and powerful Lake and the disciples saw coming towards them on its surface a living figure. It was a phantom, a spirit of the underworld, a menacing spectre coming to do them harm! The exhausting day had become a nightmare and the Master was not with them. They were alone before the terrible elements and now a dark ogre of the sea was coming at them. They yelled in terror, and with that they heard the figure speak. "Be of good cheer. It is I. Be not afraid." Unbelievable – it was the Lord! A deep astonishment gripped them all. Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. The Master had come to them in the midst of their difficulty and had resolved it. Notice the words our Lord had used: It is I. *Ego emi!* They are directly reminiscent of the words Yahweh had used when Moses asked for his name: I am who am (Septuagint: Exodus 3:14, *ego emi ho on* – I am who I am). Our Lord used them deliberately, perhaps with that past

event at the Burning Bush in mind of which he, as God, had been the saving Protagonist. It is I, Yahweh, who am with you to save you. I shall be with you.

Let us take seriously the miracles and all the deeds of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels. As St John chooses to regard them, they are signs of his glory. We saw his glory, St John writes, glory as of the Only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. Let us contemplate the wondrous Person of Jesus Christ our brother, our Saviour and our God. Let us make room for him in the boat that is our life, knowing that if we take our stand with him, all will be well.



Thursday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Jn 1: 1 In the beginning and before all ages, the Word was God and he humbled himself to be born the Saviour of the world.

Collect O God, who through your Son raised up your eternal light for all nations, grant that your people may come to acknowledge the full splendour of their Redeemer, that, bathed ever more in his radiance, they may reach everlasting glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 4:19 5-4; Psalm 72:1-2, 14 and 15bc, 17;
 Luke 4:14-22

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was

his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. Isn't this Joseph's son? they asked. (Luke 4: 14-22)

Jesus Christ In *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis (Book 1, chapter 1) we read that our chief effort ought be to study the life of Jesus Christ. The author writes that "there are many who hear the Gospel often but care little for it because they have not the spirit of Christ." If we wish "to understand fully the words of Christ," we must try to model our whole lives on his. So the Gospels will reveal the

figure of Christ to those who wish to follow him and to live by his spirit. As St Paul writes, Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. The Gospels were written for the spiritual benefit of those who have faith in Jesus and who love him. In our Gospel today we read of our Lord's return to his hometown where he spoke in the Synagogue. I have always found this passage of the Gospel to be especially intriguing and winning because of Luke's vivid description of the Person of Jesus speaking in the Synagogue. He went to Nazareth and, I suppose, stayed in his former dwelling, back now with his widowed and most holy mother. Think of the conversation between them over those few days and of Christ sharing with her his account of his public ministry now begun. He mixes with relatives and past acquaintances, and the Sabbath arrives. He enters "the Synagogue as was his custom." This time he stood up to read. Imagine Christ rising from his chair, his mother in the Synagogue as well – she knowing that he would be announcing to the congregation that in him the prophecies were being fulfilled. There he stood, showing his desire to read. The Synagogue official, seeing him ready, signals to him to come forward. He reached

the place of reading, and received the sacred scroll from the official. He unrolled it, found the passage of the prophet Isaiah he had sought and solemnly read it out. He then rolled up the scroll, returned it to the attendant, and sat down. It is all quite detailed in its description. Jesus then proceeded to deliver a profoundly impressive and moving address, the gist of which was that his hearers were, at that very moment, seeing and hearing exactly what Isaiah had been referring to in his prophecy. The townspeople of Nazareth were amazed. Never had they expected such beautiful rhetoric from this one who was of their own. It is a scene (Luke 4: 14-22) in which the real Jesus of Nazareth is brought before the reader.

But consider the wonder of what is being described. The people gaze on one of their own. Impressive as is his discourse – presumably the most impressive ever given in the long and fitful history of the tiny settlement of Nazareth – still, all they had before them was the Jesus they had known since his infancy. This was the young man who all along blended with his townsmen and clan. He was indeed so good a

person, and yet he was one of themselves. They had no inkling of the fact that this very Person they had known all along, this young man whose very infancy many would remember, was – yes! – God himself. This man, limited as was his humanity, was the unlimited God. The pure Being that is God was present before them in a limited human nature. He stood with a certain posture and moved with a certain gait. He was of a certain height and a certain weight. He had certain features, certain lines of countenance, a certain way of looking and speaking, his voice had a certain timbre and modulation. His Person was manifested within definite human characteristics, which, of course did not lessen his perfection as a divine Person. Nor did it lessen the perfection of his humanity. This Person, with his human characteristics, was the great God himself. A divine Person with his divine nature, he had taken to himself a truly human nature, such that in gazing on this man they were gazing on a true man who was true God – God the Son become this man. It can only be described as an unending wonder that God had and has become man. Those who saw him and spoke to him were in familiar relations with the infinite God. God

utterly and absolutely transcends his creation. How could it be otherwise with a Being who creates and sustains out of nothing all that is? He transcends all, while being unimaginably close to all that he sustains. But by his power he has become, not a creature, but one with a created, finite and limited nature, while retaining his eternal and infinite divine nature. God made man now had a mother, he lived as brother to men, and he suffered and died just as does each of us. Those in the Synagogue that Sabbath morning were gazing on a townsman who was and is God himself.

Let us stand there astonished at the marvel of the Incarnation. As we raise our eyes and gaze at the heavens, at the clouds, the moon and the stars, as we think of the unspeakable vastness of visible creation and the lofty grandeur of its Creator and Sustainer, let us think of the greatest of all displays of divine power. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. There were those of us who saw his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. From him has come grace upon grace, and the power to become

children of God. He, Jesus Christ, is the treasure beyond treasures, the pearl of great price. Let us sell all we own, as it were, to gain that pearl.

Friday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Ps 112 (111): 4 A light has risen in the darkness for the upright of heart; the Lord is generous, merciful and just.

Collect Grant, we ask, almighty God, that the Nativity of the Saviour of the world, made known by the guidance of a star, may be revealed ever more fully to our minds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 5:5-13; Psalm 147:12-13, 14-15, 19-20;

Luke 5:12-16

While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me

clean. Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said. Be clean! And immediately the leprosy left him. Then Jesus ordered him, Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them. Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. (Luke 5: 12-16)

The True Way Consider the extraordinary power displayed by Christ in our Gospel scene today. From ancient times the mysterious disease known as leprosy was a horror to society and a terrible affliction to the sufferer. Little could be done except to impose a strict separation of the leper from contact with society. In the book of the Leviticus we read that lepers will wear torn clothes, dishevelled hair and covered mouth, and will shout: "Impure, impure!", adding that while the leprosy lasts they will be impure. They will live isolated and will live outside the camp. It seems that in the Middle Ages all those who suffered the

disease had to express their condition through sign language. What could life have amounted to for the leper! Engulfed in his debility and decay he was cut off from human contacts except for his fellow sufferers. It is not hard to imagine the anguish of spirit with which the poor leper of our Gospel today approached Jesus. We read that "he fell with his face to the ground and begged him. Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus was his only hope, and Jesus was hope enough. He and he alone could deliver him from this immense and intractable malady which, like a sea monster holding its unfortunate prey in its vice-like teeth, was dragging him down into the depths. Undoubtedly the demonic world added its due strength to the hold of the leprosy. But Christ, full of compassion, at a single word felled the power that held the man. What power and what love! I ask you – can you think of any one in history who at a single word and by his own power drove out the leprosy "immediately" from a man who was "covered" with it? In a word, Christ was all loving and almighty. Now, consider this. Is it not to be wondered at that this man who had such extraordinary powers and who lived in God his Father

continually, did not himself step forth beyond the chosen people to conquer the world? It is clear that his plan was to make disciples of all the nations, but this he left to his disciples. And what did he himself do? Instead of choosing himself to conquer the world for God with his great powers, he chose to die.

Christ repeatedly showed that he could resist and extricate himself from danger at will. In his home town he was hustled out of town and brought to an edge from which the people intended to throw him. But he passed through the crowd and went on his way. Repeatedly he eluded the Pharisees and religious leaders when they attempted to apprehend him, including when they attempted to stone him. His hour had not yet come. At the very commencement of his Passion when, led by Judas, the temple guard came upon him in the Garden of Gethsemane, at his word they fell back to the ground (John 18:6). He told his disciples that at a word he could summon from his heavenly Father twelve legions of angels. But he chose not to exercise this power, a power the demons themselves had no means of

resisting. Rather, he chose to submit himself to the power of his enemies and be put to death. This is incomprehensible to the world. The Cross is madness and folly. Islam, for instance, denies the crucifixion and (therefore the) resurrection of Jesus. Muslims think that God rescued Jesus from the schemes of the unbelievers and raised him to heaven. Apart from the gratuitousness of this denial of the plain facts of history, it also shows how contrary are the ways of God to human expectations. The fact is that the path of obedient suffering and death is revealed by Christ's own course to be the most fruitful source of good. That is the path God intended his Messiah to take. That is the path Jesus Christ, for all his power and winning goodness, chose as the means to redeem the world. Obedience to the will of God amid suffering has the power of hosts, hosts upon hosts. Christ could have called to his aid legions upon legions of angels. He could have resisted kings and armies. He could have ruled empires – could he not? After all, what is there that he could not have done? Recognizing his prowess, Satan offered him the empires of the world if he would but worship him. But no. Christ, the new Adam, chose the path of

obedience unto death. It is this that led to the world's salvation. It was by his cross and resurrection that he redeemed the world.

If only the average Christian could think with the mind of Christ! Let this mind be in you, St Paul writes, that was in Christ Jesus. If we wish our lives to be truly fruitful in an enduring and even eternal sense, then we must follow Christ. That means we must take up our cross every day and follow in his footsteps. It means the careful and loving fulfilment of our everyday duties for love of Jesus and following his way voluntarily according as taught to us by his Church. It is not by might and not by armies that the world was saved, but by being crowned with thorns, scourged with whips and nailed to a cross. Let us pray for the grace to follow Christ in his way to glory.



Saturday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Gal 4: 4-5 God sent his Son, born of a woman, so that we might receive adoption as children.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who through your Only Begotten Son have made us a new creation for yourself, grant, we pray, that by your grace we may be found in the likeness of him, in whom our nature is united to you. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 5: 14-21; Psalm 149:1-2, 3 4, 5 6a and 9b;
John 3:22-30

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptised. Now John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptised. (This was before John was put in prison.) An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial

washing. They came to John and said to him, Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan- the one you testified about- well, he is baptising, and everyone is going to him. To this John replied, A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less. (John 3: 22-30)

The Bridegroom There are certain details about the early stage of our Lord's public ministry that are mentioned in John's Gospel, and not in the others. John tells us, as do the others, that after his baptism he returned to Galilee where he began his public ministry (2:11). According to the text of John – although John may not mean to insist on a strict chronological order of events – having begun in Galilee, Jesus returned to Judaea for the Passover (2:13). Having

cleansed the Temple and encountered the religious leaders, he "spent some time" with his disciples "baptizing there (3:22). John too was baptizing at Aenon near Salim where water was plentiful, and people kept coming to be baptized" (3:23). This was before John's arrest. So John was still engaged in his prophetic and baptizing ministry during the early stages of our Lord's public ministry. Our Lord – at least when in Judaea where John was still active – had his disciples also baptizing. This may have been to build on John's ministry and to show the profound continuity between his own mission and that of John. We also see how effortlessly our Lord was eclipsing John. We read that John's disciples came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan – the one you testified about – well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him" (3:26). We notice that our Lord did not put himself at the forefront in his ministry of baptism. John the Evangelist tells us that it was our Lord's disciples who did the baptizing, not he (4:2). Still, the people were flocking to him – "everyone is going to him," John's disciples said. This was becoming known, for as St John tells us "the Pharisees had heard that he

(Jesus) was winning over and baptizing more disciples than John" (4:1). A greater star had suddenly risen, and he was the very One John had pointed to. There is not an exact parallel of this in the Scriptures before Christ. Elijah had passed his mantle on to Elisha, but Elisha's star rose only after Elijah had gone. Here, the new prophet had been indicated by the older, and the new was outshining all others, including his immediate predecessor.

Let us recognize the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. The course of our Lord's ministry quickly manifested his uniqueness, and John the Baptist was the first to recognize it. When the facts of the case were brought to his attention – that all were now going to Jesus – John rejoiced. He told his disciples that his joy was now complete. "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He

must become greater; I must become less" (John 3: 22-30). John's words show the immense respect he had for his kinsman Jesus, whom God had revealed to him as the long-awaited Messiah. But John also mysteriously refers to him as the *bridegroom*: Jesus of Nazareth is the bridegroom of the chosen people of God. It is a cause of great joy that "everyone is going to him." The holy and ascetic John applies a metaphor which was profoundly rooted in Scripture. It is one which God had used to describe himself and his relationship with his people. Yahweh God was the Bridegroom of his people. The prophets had spoken of the people as the spouse – an all-too-often unfaithful spouse – of a Husband who was always faithful. This denoting of Jesus as the bridegroom of God's chosen people bespeaks a unique relationship between Yahweh and Jesus, suggesting an identification. According to the better Greek manuscripts, John had earlier testified to his disciples that Jesus is "God's Son" (1:34), or alternatively "God's Chosen One" – probably a reference to the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah (42:1). All this is to point to the transcendent uniqueness of Jesus Christ, far outstripping John in personal holiness

and power of ministry. This is the point here: Christ's uniqueness. John rejoices that such a One has now come, and he himself must now become less.

Let us ask for the grace to contemplate the Person of Jesus Christ with the holy and admiring gaze of John the Baptist. His whole work was to set forth before the people the figure of Jesus Christ. Let us so live and work that Jesus Christ will be honoured and glorified in the hearts of others and in the life of society. The more this is done, the more we ought rejoice. Our principal joy in life ought be to see this happen in our families and wherever the providence of God places us. Let the Bridegroom come to the hearts of his people, and let us find our greatest joy therein.



The Baptism of the Lord

(First Sunday of Ordinary Time)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 3: 16-17 After the Lord was baptized, the heavens were opened, and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and the voice of the Father thundered: This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who, when Christ had been baptized in the River Jordan and as the Holy Spirit descended upon him, solemnly declared him your beloved Son, grant that your children by adoption, reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, may always be well pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, whose Only Begotten Son has appeared in our very flesh, grant, we pray, that we may be inwardly transformed through him whom we recognize as outwardly like ourselves. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 42:1-4.6-7; Psalm 29:1-4, 9-10;

Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-16.21-22

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, I baptise you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased. (Luke 3:15-16.21-22)

Christ's Baptism The liturgical season of Christmas ends with the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord – or more accurately it begins the Ordinary Time of the Liturgical Year during which we contemplate our Lord's public ministry and teaching. We can tend, though, to celebrate our Lord's Baptism in a fairly routine way, and fail to see the biblical richness of this event. Let us remember what the baptism proclaimed and administered by John signified. John had been accepted as a prophet and his prophetic message was, Repent, for the Lord's Rule is coming. Prepare to receive the Messiah God is sending! His baptism was a ceremony in which the repentant sinner acknowledged before God and his appointed prophet that he was a sinner, and asked his pardon. The pouring of the water symbolized the forgiveness which the sinner trusted he was being granted. People from various groupings – tax collectors, soldiers, prostitutes and numerous others – came to hear the word of God, repent of their sins and receive John's baptism of water. Then, quietly and without any fanfare, from the midst of this throng of sinners stepped forward another to be baptized – one so astonishingly holy that the demonic world had already marked him out

with the utmost concern. Soon after, Satan would approach him formally in the wilderness to negotiate and to tempt. Here at John's baptism, Jesus acts as would any one of the great crowd of sinners. Regarding this procedure, perhaps something of a parallel might be one of great crusading evangelical sessions of Billy Graham. His rousing address culminates in an invitation to repent, to convert, to make a new beginning. Those who wish to do this are asked step forward, to come to the front and by this very action to declare publicly their intent to take the path of goodness of life and obedience to God's commands. There is a pause. Silence ensues, and one by one from various parts of the great theatre people rise and step forward. In doing this, they are acknowledging their sinfulness and their intention to begin a new path. Many come forward, and the numbers grow. They are all sinners, and they wish to do better. So too at John's baptism the crowds come – but here One comes forward who is the all-holy Son of God. There is no sin in him and no need to convert.

What is Jesus doing and saying? He is not saying that he is a sinner, for he is all-holy. He is not presenting himself as one asking God for pardon. We read in the Gospel that John himself was profoundly nonplussed at having Jesus stand before him for baptism. He hesitates in a way he never hesitated with anyone else. He himself, he said to Jesus, was the sinner, and if anything it is Jesus who ought be baptizing him. Our Lord did not deny it – but he insisted, saying that it was fitting before God that his baptism proceed. Our Lord was taking part with sinful humanity. He was identifying with every man and woman, even the least. It was a symbolic step that in effect linked the beginning of our Lord's work to its culmination both on the cross, and at the end of time at the Judgment. In the Gospel of St Matthew, our Lord tells his hearers that at the Judgment he will say to each: whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine you did to me. That is to say, our Lord at the end will proclaim his union with each and all of his brothers, including the least, and here at his baptism we have the first step in this public proclamation. At his baptism our Lord was acting as one with all his sinful brothers, including the

least. As their brother, their leader and their representative, he stepped forward for the baptism of John. Moreover, in going down into the water, he was prefiguring his descent into the waters of death at Calvary. Our Lord knew that his work, as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, would be to bear the sins of his brothers and to expiate for them. As he would express it to his own disciples, it would be the great baptism of his life. Can you be baptized with the baptism with which I must be baptized? he asked James and John, when they petitioned for first places in his kingdom. I have a baptism, he said to them on another occasion, and how wrought I am till it is over! The baptism of Jesus Christ is an event in the Scriptures which is full of meaning, and we ought not let the few verses in which it is described be passed over without our relishing that meaning in our hearts.

And so it is that "as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:15-16.21-22). These words of God are plainly unique

in the Scriptures and they reveal the uniqueness of the One to whom they refer. The holy Trinity bursts upon the scene of our redemption and Christ commences his redemptive ministry. He will bear on his shoulders the sins of mankind, expiate for them, and baptize his brothers with the Holy Spirit. The gates of heaven will be opened for all of us, and holiness will be gift of God.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.535-537

(The Baptism of Jesus)

A Second Reflection:

The Coming of the Spirit Our Lord spent the first thirty years of his life in the obscurity of Nazareth. Almost 90% of his life was lived in Nazareth as an unknown carpenter with his foster-father, and Mary his mother. In the plan of God that stage would pass, for our Lord had a great and public ministry ahead of him, crowned with redemptive suffering, rejection and death. What a difference there was between life at Nazareth, and his life thereafter! The turning point was his baptism

in the river Jordan, which we contemplate today. He came quietly to John, asking to be baptised as if he were just another sinner, though being without sin. Baptised with water, as if repenting and being cleansed from sin, he was then baptised by his heavenly Father with a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came down upon Him (Luke 3:15-16, 21-22) to launch him on his public mission. Henceforth the Holy Spirit was working in him with a new power and effect. By the power of the Holy Spirit he cast out devils, cured the sick, forgave sinners, proclaimed and explained God's kingdom, instituted the Eucharist. By the power of the Holy Spirit he offered himself as a perfect victim on the cross. By the power of the Spirit he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven to rejoin his Father. The Holy Spirit had been at work in various great figures and prophets of the Old Testament, but in the case of our Lord, his action was without parallel in its saving effectiveness.

All this began in earnest at our Lord's baptism. No other person had been or would be such a saving instrument of the Holy Spirit as our

Lord was from the moment of his baptism. His baptism signaled a new and unique entry of the Holy Spirit as a protagonist in the world. Then when this same Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son at Pentecost, this marked the sharing by the Church – the mystical body of Christ – in the evangelizing and sanctifying ministry of Christ. The Holy Spirit then became the Church's sanctifier and inspiration. Christ, the head, was now at work in his body, reaching out to all nations. And again, this was by the power of the Holy Spirit. At our Baptism, and again at our Confirmation, this same Holy Spirit enters into our own individual lives. He works with effect on our minds and hearts, and through our daily work and life he works on the lives of others. He enables each of us to become another Christ, and to be truly apostolic, drawing others to him. Let us resolve always to love the Holy Spirit, and resolve to live constantly by His guidance. For this reason the feast of the Baptism of Christ, marking the end of Christmastide and the beginning of the Ordinary Time of the Church's Year, ought be a day of special celebration for each of us. Just as the Spirit came upon Jesus, so he has come upon each of us his members. Just as his coming launched

Christ's public mission of bearing witness, so his coming to us has launched our mission of bearing witness to Jesus.

Let us rely on the Holy Spirit to help us fulfil this, our mission in life. Come, Holy Spirit! Fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love! Lord, send forth your Spirit!

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.535-537

(The baptism of Jesus)



Season of Lent



Ash Wednesday

Entrance Antiphon Ps 13 (12): 6 O Lord, I trust in your merciful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful with me.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, always pondering spiritual things, we may carry out in both word and deed that which is pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51:3 6, 12-14 and 17;
2 Corinthians 5:20 - 6:2; Matthew 6:1-6.16-18

Jesus said, Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received

their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:1 6.16 18)

Call to Holiness Religious myth is defined in different ways. In general a 'religious myth' is a religious story (of, say, the origins) and

the 'story' could well be historically true. More commonly it is a story which in some respects is historically and scientifically true, while in others it is, we might say, allegorical. For long periods of history and in various societies, religious myths were the fruit of the religious mind and imagination, and had little or nothing in them of hard historical fact. The concern driving and creating the myth was not for scientific fact and strict history but for meaning and significance. Most of the myths of the Australian Aboriginal Dreaming, for instance, are of this latter order. One of the markers differentiating an age or stage of this latter kind of religious myth from one in which the concern is for objective fact, is the discovery and insistence on physical laws. The course of events is seen to be dependent not primarily on the intervention and action of the various gods or higher spirits (say, the god of the sea or of war) but on physical laws. These laws are objective, they are capable of being investigated, and they determine the course of the world. A disastrous tidal wave is not due to the irritation of the god Neptune, but to laws of crustal movements and wave propagation in the sea. The fact of objective physical laws is a

cornerstone of Western culture. I mention the rise of the appreciation of physical laws as an introduction to *another kind of law* which, though objective, is often not appreciated in modern culture – and even rejected. I refer to the *natural moral law*. What supports the modern insistence on physical law and historical fact is that it is empirically verifiable. One modern assumption is that it is only what is empirically verifiable that is factual – and what is empirically verifiable about "goodness"? It is empirically verifiable if "goodness" is reduced to the "useful." If the law stating that you must be good and not evil is a statement of what will be advantageous for your happiness, then this law is deemed verifiable and therefore acceptable.

This is one reason – though not the only one – why the notion of a natural moral law is viewed with suspicion. But of course the evidence for the natural moral law is everywhere. Whether or not there is legislation to support it, all know that you must not murder. You must not lie or steal. The whole world regards Hitler and Stalin with moral disdain, and for Germany and Russia respectively they are a

terrible embarrassment. These two ogres, and others besides, should not have done what they did. The natural moral law is objective and absolute, though not physical. Nor does it ultimately consist in personal advantage or utility. The natural law is absolute, whether or not it is of advantage. The fundamental natural law is that man must do what is good and avoid what is evil. If a man does this he will be good himself – and good he must strive to be. This is a natural law – not a natural physical law, but a natural law of the moral order. While in his heart man senses that his happiness depends on his being good, this law commanding goodness cannot be reduced to a judgment on what ultimately will serve his happiness. Within this natural moral law that the mind and heart of man promulgates, there is a summons. It is the summons to be as good as possible and to avoid evil as much as possible. Man is naturally called – commanded, we might say – to be good and holy. Indeed, this is the fundamental law that man is instinctively and immediately aware of, even more so than the physical laws that govern his life and his world. He is commanded from his depths to be good, and he desires from his depths to be good. He has a

natural aspiration to holiness and this natural law is confirmed by God himself who in his revelation commands holiness. Be holy, he said, for I am holy – and this is done by observing his commandments. But how is this to be done, because man observes within himself yet another law fighting against the natural moral law commanding goodness? It is a law of self-seeking that drags him along into sin, and which prompts him to reject, deny and be suspicious of the higher law within him that summons him to be good by doing what is good.

At the start of Lent, the Church reminds us that Christ has made holiness possible for us, and that "now is the favourable time; this is the day of salvation" (II Corinthians 6:2). Lent is a time of special grace and opportunity, and we must seize the chance. It is the chance to grow in what we most need, in what we most want, and in what is most required of us: *goodness*. God is active in our lives leading us to sanctity, but we must do our part. The Church identifies three areas of struggle and effort: prayer, penance, and practical charity, and our Lord comments on each in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 6: 1-6.16-

18). The danger will be that we will not get down to it, but leave it all for another day. Thus life will pass and our yearnings will come to little.



Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 55 (54): 17-20, 23 When I cried to the Lord, he heard my voice; he rescued me from those who attack me. Entrust your cares to the Lord, and he will support you.

Collect Prompt our actions with your inspiration, we pray, O Lord, and further them with your constant help, that all we do may always begin from you and by you be brought to completion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1:1-4 and 6;
 Luke 9:22-25

And Jesus said, The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be put to death and on the third day be raised to life. Then he said to them all: If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? (Luke 9:22-25)

Suffering In a very technological age there is a question that would not occur to lots of people as they contemplate the world. It is this: why is there anything at all? For many people such a question simply does not arise. The world is a fact of life and there is nothing more to be said except to investigate it, understand its laws, and then (above all) to use it. But it is obvious that just as individual things (such as a flower or an individual human being) need not exist because, after all, they come to be and pass away, so too the total ensemble of things – the world – need not exist. So why is there anything, then? Putting it starkly, why is

there not nothing, nothing at all? Such a question prompts the thought of the existence of the Creator. Well now, if we shift our gaze from the world to the suffering and evil that is in the world, it is obvious that these sufferings and evils present a massive problem to man. Again, a similar question arises, why is there all this suffering and evil? This ought lead to a great interest in the answer provided by Revelation, that it was due not to the Creator but to the Fall of man at the beginning. This, of course, does not solve the problem because the obvious question is that if God were all-loving and almighty, then could he not have "fixed it all up" immediately – or done something else to free the world from all its suffering? There is not the space to pursue this here because, to begin with, if we grant a loving Creator, we could not fully understand why he permits such great sufferings. But then, our best chance of gaining some light on things is not to pursue a mere philosophical consideration of the matter but to consider things in the light of the Person of Jesus Christ. After all, the claim is that this man was God and he suffered enormously. He did not "deserve" to suffer at all. Why was it permitted that this extraordinary Man suffer so

greatly? If we look on the world as present in microcosm, as it were, in the Person of Jesus Christ – then Jesus Christ throws light on the suffering in the world generally. He is the light of the world. There are two sides to the answer. Jesus Christ suffered manifestly because of sin inflicted on him from without, and it was because of his suffering that the world was redeemed from its sin.

Suffering is indeed a dark, unfortunate and terrible fact. Its origins lie in sin and not in the will of the Creator. As we contemplate the figure of the sinless Jesus Christ on the Cross, this is the first thing that bears upon us. Suffering and evil comes from man's sin, and this sin is terrible. Its greatest manifestation is the passion and death of the all-holy Christ. That having been said, in a more important sense, the passion and death of Jesus Christ – symbolic, we might say, of the sufferings of mankind – are shimmering with light and joy. It was precisely through his sufferings, borne in a spirit of absolute and loving obedience to his heavenly Father, that the world was redeemed. Has there ever been any other theory proposed to take away the sin of the

world? As far as I am aware, no such theory exists. The only comprehensive proposal for mankind's radical and complete redemption from sin is the Christian one, and this pivots around the sufferings of Jesus Christ. By his passion and death – so extraordinary, so undeserved – he took away the sin of the world, and then set in motion the means to bring this Blessing to each man and woman. The one who believes will be saved, he said, and the one who wilfully refuses will be condemned. It is a mighty answer involving an incalculable cost, and yet one that is astonishingly simple for each individual. But it pivots around the sufferings and death of Christ. Why is such suffering permitted in the world? Look at Jesus Christ and ask why it was permitted that *he* suffer so much. He suffered so much in order to achieve so much. His sufferings brought an eternal Blessing to man. So, suffering – that suffering that flows from obedience to the will of God – is now not fundamentally a curse, but fundamentally a path to blessings. If we suffer in union with Jesus we shall rise and reign in union with him. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants

to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9: 22-25).

If we want to understand man and the meaning of what makes up his life, especially his sufferings, then look to Jesus Christ. He is not only the revelation of God, but the true revelation of man. He stated repeatedly to his disciples that it was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer in order to enter into his glory. Somehow we must get it into our heads and into our hearts that the path to glory is through obedient suffering. The Cross of Christ is both dark and bright. It reveals the basic source of suffering, but it also reveals what can now be its fundamental consequence. Let us place our hand in the hand of Jesus Christ and walk with him along the path he chose for us.

A Second Reflection: (Deuteronomy 30: 15-20)

"Here, then, I have today set before you life and prosperity, death and doom."

The Basic Issues It is possible for a person to be carried along in life by circumstances, opportunities and disappointments, while failing to recognize the fundamental issues in life and to make the appropriate choices. The real issue is, what kind of person shall he be and what path shall he choose to be his? The reading from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy places before the fundamental issues and the basic choices we have to make if our life is to have lasting value. "See, today I set before you life and prosperity, death and disaster. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin on you today, if you love the Lord your God and follow his ways, if you keep his commandments, his laws, his customs, you will live and increase... But if your heart strays, if you refuse to listen, I tell you today, you will most certainly perish" (Deuteronomy 30: 15 20). The most radical issue is the choice between obeying God and refusing to do so. As the first reading explains, this is the choice between life and death. It is the bedrock issue, for the choice has far reaching consequences for this life, and eternal consequences for the next. Our ultimate future depends not on circumstances, but on our own

choosing. It depends on the exercise of personal freedom, and not on good or bad luck.

During Lent, let us endeavour to see the fundamental issues in their stark reality. We have a clear cut choice: to set out to love God by obeying him, or we can refuse to do so. Lent is the favourable time of God's grace to make the right choice and to live it out with our whole heart.



Friday after Ash Wednesday

Entrance Antiphon Ps 30 (29): 11 The Lord heard and had mercy on me; the Lord became my helper.

Collect Show gracious favour, O Lord, we pray, to the works of penance we have begun, that we may have strength to accomplish with sincerity the bodily observances we undertake. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 58:1-9; Psalm 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 18-19;

Matthew 9:14-15

Then John's disciples came and asked him, How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? Jesus answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. (Matthew 9: 14-15)

Self-denial It is interesting that for all the praise accorded by our Lord to John the Baptist, and for all the profound and unequivocal deference shown to our Lord by John, hardly any conversation between them is recorded in the Gospels. The one notable conversation that is recorded is brief and unambiguous: John is in confusion at the sudden prospect of baptizing Jesus. He himself is the sinner, he says to Jesus, and it is he himself who ought be baptized – with Jesus doing the baptizing. But Jesus insists that it go ahead. What a magnificent *disciple* John would have made, with decades of missionary work for the Master ahead – but it was not the plan of God. The paradigm was

more that of the prophetic mantle passing from Elijah to Elisha. Jesus the Messiah receives the prophetic mantle from John, the Elijah who was to come. A further thing is to be noted. Later in the Gospel, John appears uncertain about the ministry of Jesus as it begins to unfold. From prison he sends his disciples to Jesus with a formal enquiry: was he, after all, the one who was to come? In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 9:14-15), it is the *disciples* of John who are puzzled, and it concerns the lack of vigour in fasting they see among our Lord's disciples. They could not understand this glaring omission, and they presented their perplexity to our Lord himself. In his response, our Lord makes two points. Firstly, while he, the Bridegroom, is with his disciples how could they do anything but live and rejoice in his friendship? Secondly, when he is gone, they certainly will fast. The first thing, then, is that he himself, being the Bridegroom, is the all-important feature of religion among his disciples. Expressing it differently, the heart, soul and centre of Christianity is the very person of Jesus, for he is the Bridegroom. In fact, these are the very terms in which the religion of the Old Testament is described by the prophets:

God is the Husband and Bridegroom of his people, and therefore their failures in religion are failures in nuptial fidelity. Our Lord himself occupies this place in the new dispensation, for he is the Bridegroom of the new covenant that is coming.

Christ is telling the disciples of John that the all-important thing for his disciples at this point is to attain a profound realization of his own Person and an understanding that eternal life consists in knowing, believing and loving him. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As he would say in his prayer during the Last Supper, "This is eternal life: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent" (John 17: 3). But the time would soon come when he would be taken away from them. Then they will indeed be expected to "fast," which is to say to live lives of genuine self-denial. While gone from them visibly, he would then be with them in the power of the Holy Spirit. Then they would have the God-given grace and capacity to follow him generously and in all the elements of a fervent religion. "Then they will fast." Our Lord never disputed with the disciples of John nor with the Pharisees

that they should fast. He unmasked the hypocrisy of many of the Pharisees in their fasting: they fasted, but did so in order to win the acclaim of men. But he assumed that all would pray, that all would fast, and that all would give alms. When you fast, he said, do not put on a gloomy look as the hypocrites do. They have had their reward. In fact, we see our Lord teaching his disciples repeatedly that he himself must follow the path of suffering unto death. It was absolutely essential to his mission precisely as the Bridegroom that he lay down his life for all. To be a disciple of the Bridegroom entails renouncing oneself, taking up one's cross daily, and following in his footsteps. By our baptism and confirmation we have been given the Holy Spirit to enable us to pursue this redemptive path generously each day. Thus it is that throughout Christian history the heroes of Christian life have been profoundly penitential. In their various ways and in accord with their varied vocations, they have suffered and died in union with their crucified Master. The icon of the Christian is the crucifix, with the figure of Jesus hanging battered and dead therefrom. He has gone from

us visibly, and now we must follow in his footsteps. That is to say, we must "fast."

Do I recognise in myself a constant unwillingness to embark on any form of self-denial? Well, let me start in little ways. I shall start by bearing patiently the difficulties and circumstances inherent in my daily work and life, and offer it all to God in union with Jesus. I shall start with a determined effort to do something about the fault that is particularly persistent in my life. I shall also start with a few voluntary mortifications, such as doing without some luxury. The virtue of self-denial will then grow, and Lent, the time of grace, will bring the blessing of an advance in holiness. Jesus is the centre of religion, and he has shown me the way: it is the way to Calvary.



Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 69 (68): 17 Answer us, Lord, for your mercy is kind; in the abundance of your mercies, look upon us.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, look with compassion on our weakness and ensure us your protection by stretching forth the right hand of your majesty. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 58:9-14; Psalm 86:1-2, 3-4, 5-6;
 Luke 5:27-32

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. Follow me, Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, Why do you eat and

drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'? Jesus answered them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:27-32)

Sense of Sin Our Gospel scene today is one of simple beauty. We read in the Gospel of St John (2:24-25) that our Lord did not need anyone to tell him what was in a man. He could read their hearts. In our text today we read that Jesus "went out" of the house where he had been teaching, and where he had cured the paralytic and forgiven his sins. He saw a tax collector at his workplace and simply said to him "Follow me." We are not told that our Lord had had prior contact with him – as he had, for instance, with Simon and Andrew, and James and John, soon after his baptism by John. Our Lord uttered two words of call and Levi "got up, left everything and followed him." It was a remarkable response, just as it was a remarkable call. We could ask why our Lord chose to call such a person as Levi – whom most identify with the author of the first Gospel – when he, Levi, had worked in such an odious profession. It is the mystery of divine vocations and the same

question could be asked of countless others in the course of history. They received a call from Christ to follow him closely when there was little to recommend them. But let us consider Levi and ask, what was it in him that helps to account for the alacrity of his response? One of our Lord's parables may give us a clue because in that parable the most admirable character is a tax collector. The parable presents us with two people – the one who was religious by very profession, and the one who by very profession was an obvious *sinner*. It is the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, each praying in the Temple. At the end of the story, the Tax Collector goes home right *with* God, while the Pharisee does not. The reason why the Tax Collector is in union with God is because his prayer is a humble profession of personal sinfulness, together with a heartfelt prayer for pardon. The Pharisee has no consciousness of sin. He is simply conscious of the good things he believes he is doing. He is not like the despised Tax Collector whom he sees well behind him and hidden away from obvious view in the Temple.

There are other examples of this sense of personal sin. In this same Gospel of St Luke the Pharisees and the lawyers are contrasted with the tax collectors who accepted the baptism of John (7:29). In our Gospel today (Luke 5: 27-32), Levi's tax collector friends flocked to be part of the banquet Levi put on for our Lord. He and they loved our Lord. His was not the only case. We remember how a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, responded to our Lord's friendship. Our Lord invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner, and Zacchaeus responded magnificently, welcoming our Lord warmly, giving half his goods to the poor, and repaying fourfold those he had unjustly cheated (Luke 19: 8). It seems that Luke in compiling his Gospel was interested in the response of the tax collectors, well known sinners, to the all-holy Jesus. No one was excluded from friendship with our Lord. Luke's account of the call of Levi may be regarded as a paradigm of Christ's attitude to sinners and of the chance that they have to repent and give themselves totally to the person and mission of Jesus. Is there a key to understanding the immediacy of the response of Levi and many regarded as sinners? At least one key was their *consciousness of sin*

and their desire for pardon. Christ with his holiness and his compassion was the manifest answer to their need. They knew they had a tremendous need for redemption, for holiness, and therefore for Jesus. They were conscious of personal sin, and Jesus exuded holiness. Their response was immediate when the merciful and loving invitation came. This sense of need was lacking in many of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Let us notice too that John the Baptist, the one who pointed Jesus out as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, had himself a profound sense of sin. In the one recorded conversation we have between Jesus and John, John shows his sense of personal sin. His “sins” must have been slight indeed, in view of Christ’s superlative praise for him. *It is I who ought be baptized by you*, he said to Jesus when Jesus presented himself for John’s “baptism of *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (Luke 3:3). I am not fit to undo his sandal straps, John said in referring to the coming Messiah.

Let us learn from Levi and his immediate and total response to the call of Jesus. If this is to happen to us, we must cultivate a deep sense of our own sinfulness and need of the friendship and grace of Jesus Christ. Lent is the time for acknowledging sin, seeking God's pardon, and hearing the call of Christ to be his friend and share in his mission. Let us be like Levi who "got up, left everything and followed him."

A Second Reflection: (Luke 5:27-32)

Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

Levi's Response The great and ever pressing issue of each day is the call of God to each of us that we be striving for authentic holiness. We are called to be saints, hidden, known as such only to God, but saints nevertheless. The saint is one who loves God with all his heart; who expresses this love in the generous fulfilment of daily duties; and who is prepared to struggle to bring this about – with the grace of God. Why is it that we make so little progress? All too often it is because the pattern

of our life does not reflect what Levi did when our Lord said to him, "Follow me." Levi left everything and got up and followed him. That disposition to leave all was what our Lord wanted. With that readiness to respond to his call immediately our Lord could lead Levi on to sanctity and to a total following in his footsteps. By contrast consider the rich young man. He came to our Lord and asked what he had to do to gain eternal life. Our Lord invited him to leave all and to follow him. But he went away sad.

During this Lent let us resolve to leave behind what is preventing us from a total following of the Master each day. In this lies the grandeur of ordinary life. Let what we see in Levi's response to our Lord's call be the pattern of our lives.



First Sunday of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 91 (90): 15-16 When he calls on me, I will answer him; I will deliver him and give him glory, I will grant him length of days.

Collect Grant, almighty God, through the yearly observances of holy Lent, that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 26:4-10; Psalm 91:1-2, 10-15;
 Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread. Jesus answered, It is written: 'Man does not live on

bread alone.' The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, I will give you all their authority and splendour, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours. Jesus answered, It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.' The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down from here. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' Jesus answered, It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:1-13)

Temptation On this first Sunday of Lent there is placed before us a remarkable Gospel scene. The all-holy God had become man and, immersed in our human condition, was being tempted to swerve from his divinely-appointed path. The temptation did not arise from

disordered interior impulses as it usually does with us, but directly from Satan. The Redeemer of man, though himself sinless, shared sinful man's lot of being tempted! As we think of the vast ocean of human history, we also think of the vast sea of human temptation, of which any number of examples could be given. I once read of a girl of six who saw her family fall apart. After the divorce her father was gone. She lived with her mother in a poor flat where she could hear the rats eating their way in through the floorboards. In school she worked hard and did poorly. Because her parents were divorced, she felt like an outcast. 'If there is a God,' she said, 'then why am I so different, why don't I have a family?' *She was tempted against faith.* On top of this, she developed a serious stomach illness, but there was no money for doctors. Then, without any conscious faith, she got a prayer card and started a novena to St Therese of the Child Jesus. On the ninth day she was cured, and then she knew from personal experience that there was a God who cared. She grew up and now she is known to millions of viewers as the nun Mother Angelica, who has written numerous small books, and who most notably began the famous EWTN TV network to

teach others across the world about the God who loves and cares for us. Due to strokes and bad health she retired in 2001 to the seclusion of her monastery, but the programmes of her network are watched everywhere. The network continues to expand. *Time Magazine* once described Mother Angelica as "arguably the most influential Roman Catholic woman in America." The point here is that she too shared in the common lot of being tempted. Due to her experience of suffering and evil she was tempted not to believe in God. By the power of grace she overcame the temptation and went on to a magnificent service of Christ and his Church.

Our Lord allowed himself to be tempted, as we read in the Gospel (Luke 4:1-13). We could tend to think of our Lord as being like us in all things except in being tempted. No. He was like to us in all things except in having sinned. Never having been touched by original or personal sin – impossible for God the Son – his temptations could never have arisen from any inner disorder as is the case with us. However, as man he allowed himself to be tempted by

Satan. Presumably Satan expended all his dark talent, all his long experience at lies and seduction, all his most subtle devices to trip Christ up, aiming perhaps at our Lord's high and loving zeal for mankind. He perhaps could see that he had no chance of leading Christ into self-seeking. Perhaps his strategy was to insinuate more effective methods of commanding the allegiance of the world for his good purposes. "Make it easy for them, all these people you dream of benefiting. If you do not, they will not follow you. In any case, do not overdo it. Your task need not crush you. Create food by miracles on these very stones. Perform displays and spectacles and in everything be magnificent. There is a quick way – acknowledge me and I promise to give you the world." Satan was tempting the Son of God to follow a path which was not that of his heavenly Father. These temptations would recur again and again, and they would come not only from Satan, but even from his dearest friends. When Peter tried to persuade our Lord to avoid the cross and death, our Lord called him "Satan". Our Lord resisted absolutely the temptation to take any easy way, and also any temptation to give us, his disciples, the easy way. Precisely

because he was tempted – perhaps mightily in view of the mighty task and sufferings ahead of him – he shows us the way. St Augustine writes that by being tempted, Christ shows us how to triumph over temptation. Lent is the holy season when we go into the desert with Jesus, praying, doing penance and uncovering the deceits into which we have fallen. Temptations are deceits: by giving in to the temptation we gradually convince ourselves that what we want is not wrong but right. Satan makes himself like an angel of light.

On this first Sunday of Lent, the example of Jesus provides us with an agenda for Lent. We must unmask temptations, be alert to them, resist them, and avoid them. They can lead to sin. Satan is grinning behind them. We must be very canny about temptations to sin, and never give any quarter to them, no matter how minor. It is an ambition that ought be growing during life and for this we must have the example of Jesus, and the gift of his grace won for us by his obedient sufferings. His example is given to us in the Gospels, and his

grace is given to us in the Church's Sacraments. During Lent let us enter wholeheartedly into this all-important program of life.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2846-2854

(Temptation)

A Second Reflection: (Luke 4:1-13)

"Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit through the wilderness, being tempted by the devil for forty days." (Luke 4:1-13)

Christ's Work In the inspired memory of the Old Testament, the liberation of God's people from their slavery in Egypt was the mightiest of God's works. As the first reading puts it, "The Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm" (Deuteronomy 26:4-10). This pointed to what was to come, but which would be on a far grander scale. It would be a liberating act again, but of far greater significance for sinful man. The liberation would be from the slavery to

sin. Both were mighty works, but the later work, the work of Christ, would have several special characteristics. One would be its cost to God. The Old Testament accounts of God liberating his enslaved people do not give the impression that it cost God greatly. Rather, they reveal directly his great compassion and overwhelming power. He was the greatest of saviours, his power showing itself in his mercy. But with Christ, what is directly revealed is God's readiness to suffer indescribably, and in this way to atone for the sins of man. God's power is shown in a love that suffers personally. God's mighty power was manifest in the extent of the sacrifice he himself made and what it cost him. In the Old Testament God's mighty work was liberating his people from physical slavery. In the New, God's mighty work was to suffer and to atone for the sin of mankind. It was to take away the sin of the world – it was the greatest work ever done in history. But there is another aspect of this work which cost God so much. It was his contest with Satan, which makes its first appearance right at the start of our Lord's public ministry, as reported in the Gospel of today. In the former liberation from slavery, the Pharaoh was the oppressor and opponent of

God's plans. In the redemptive work of Christ Satan was the oppressor and the opponent, and Satan makes his appearance in a way and at a scale he never did in the Old Testament.

The Gospel of today places before us the two antagonists. Satan tempted Christ repeatedly to swerve from the will of the Father, and each time he was repelled (Luke 4:1-13). Christ would be obedient unto death. Just as Pharaoh loaded the children of Israel with burdens and indignities, so Satan poured burdens and indignities on Christ, the redeeming representative of man. And Christ accepted the burden, for it was the burden of the sin of the world. Let us show in our lives the readiness to suffer with Christ for our own sins and the sins of others. Let us be ready to follow Christ in the work of atonement. Let us also manifest in our lives a vigorous fight against sin and Satan, overcoming him by our daily obedience to God.



Monday of the First Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 123 (122): 2-3 Like the eyes of slaves on the hand of their lords, so our eyes are on the Lord our God, till he show us his mercy. Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy.

Collect Convert us, O God our Saviour, and instruct our minds by heavenly teaching, that we may benefit from the works of Lent. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Leviticus 19:1-2. 11-18. Psalm 18;

Matthew 25:31-46

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your

inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will

reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 35:31-46)

The King Early in 2015 I was watching part of a lecture on EWTN television. It was being given by John Haldane, the then-Professor of Philosophy at St Andrews University, Scotland – I think the lecture may have been given at the University of Steubenville, USA. As was his way, Haldane threw in various remarks in passing, and one of them was that he did not think that God should be referred to as *King*. No further explanation was given, and he went on to conclude his address. Let this introduce what we notice in our Lord's description of the Last Judgment – that he is a *King*. Obviously, God cannot be referred to as if he is *but* another king among the kings of this earth, nor the King of kings as if he is *but* a higher king than they. It hardly needs to be said that it is an image which is used by way of analogy, just as we refer to God as Lord, Master, or whatever. I refer to this, not to discuss what was Haldane's possible position which I do not know, but to introduce

our Lord's famous parable of the Last Judgment, in which he, *the Son of Man*, presents himself as *the King, seated on his throne of heavenly glory*. He is the King of all kings, and he has come to judge *all the nations* on whether they have fulfilled his laws. As was within the power of kings then, a sentence follows his judgment on their deeds – but in his case, with *eternal* reward or punishment. Our passage is from Matthew, and in Matthew's infancy narrative, the Magi from the East refer to Jesus as *the king*. “*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have...come to worship him*” (2:2). Herod was alarmed, precisely because he was thought of as a “king” – the Messiah, of course. Later, Satan tempted Christ precisely with the offer of sovereignty over “*all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them*” (Matthew 4: 8-9). Soon after, Christ began his preaching. He called on all to “*Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (4:17). In the prayer he taught to the disciples, he asks them to pray to the Father that “*Your kingdom come*”. Christ went all through Galilee preaching the *kingdom of heaven*, and by means of parables describing this kingdom. At times it is referred to as the *kingdom of God*

(12:28). Very notable is our Lord's conversation at Caesarea Philippi – Christ tells Simon Peter that he will receive the keys to the *kingdom of heaven* (16:19).

The highest moment of the Gospel narratives is our Lord's crucifixion, and his being a *king* is a pivotal issue. Though Pilate could see that there was nothing politically seditious in Jesus and his public ministry, and though he could see that the leaders of the Jews had handed him over for crucifixion because of envy, his *kingship* was at the forefront. Jesus calmly explained that he was indeed a king, but that his kingship was not of this world. He was not a king to challenge political and military power. He was born to bear witness to God's truth, and those who were of the truth would listen to his voice and follow him – in this sense he was the King of kings and Lord of lords. The image of Jesus *as the King* is profoundly scriptural. It has its roots in the Davidic kingship (a millennium before Christ), arising as a result of the demand of the Israelitic tribes that Samuel anoint a king to lead and unite them. Saul was anointed but fell because of

disobedience. David was then anointed and, despite serious lapses into sin, conducted a glorious rule never to be equalled by his successors. He united the quarrelling tribes into a political kingdom – which, though, fell apart after him. One notable feature of David’s dynasty, incidentally, is that it lasted some four centuries before Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians – no mean feat when we think of the length of dynasties throughout history, including those of Greece and Rome. This fact alone implanted the Davidic dynasty deeply within the Hebrew religious imagination. Now, David’s personal rule became iconic and part of the prophecies. Through the prophet Nathan, God promised that his throne would never end (2 Samuel 7:16). Hence it was understood that the coming Messiah would be of David’s line – and the Angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that her Son would sit on the throne of David forever (Luke 1: 32-33). This was and is the Christian position: the promised descendant of King David, the *Messiah-King*, is Jesus of Nazareth (the Jewish people still await the promised descendant). The point we are making here is that Jesus, in God’s plan, is *the King*, *the Master* and *the Lord*. This is

graphically portrayed in the seer's vision of the Book of Revelation in which "The Word of God" has a name inscribed of *King of kings and Lord of lords* (19:16).

Thus it is that in our passage today (Matthew 25: 31-46) our Lord describes himself as the *King* who will come to judge the living and the dead. *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory..... He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father.'* Years ago I remember a very good and intelligent priest saying to me that he thought the reason why the feast of Jesus Christ the King (at the end of the Ordinary Time of the Liturgical Year) had never caught on was because modern kings were redundant. Maybe so, but the answer is to look on the Kingship of Jesus Christ with the eyes and mind of *Scripture*. Scripture powerfully presents Jesus as the *Messiah-King*. He is *King* of kings and *Lord* of lords.

Second reflection: (Leviticus 19:1-2)

A Holiness of Love One of the most significant issues in human history has been the variety of notions of what it is to be good, and in the case of man's religions, what it means to be holy. These notions have shaped societies and civilizations. A great religious leader arises, be he a Buddha, a Zoroaster, a Confucius, a Mahomet. He has, and develops, his notion of holiness and goodness of life, and how to attain it. It could be through the attainment of enlightenment and the absence of desire. It could be to acknowledge no god but God. A civilization's character will be shaped according to the fundamental notion of holiness – and so it is in great sections of the world. Now, the holiness that has been revealed by God has a distinctive character stemming, of course, from the character of God. "The Lord spoke to Moses; he said: 'Speak to the whole community of the sons of Israel and say to them: "Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19: 1-2). What then does it mean to be holy, as God reveals it to be? It does not mean ignoring the world and endeavouring to escape from it for Him. It

means engaging with the world by love and service. And so we read in Leviticus that "You must not steal nor deal deceitfully or fraudulently with your neighbour", and in a host of other ways we must love our neighbour as ourselves (Leviticus 19: 11-18). That is what God himself is like, and he requires the same of us. Christ fulfilled all of this, becoming one of us and dying for us on the Cross in order to save the world. He requires that we love others as he loves us. He identifies with the least: "For I was hungry and you gave me food... Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you..? .. I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." (Matthew 25: 31-46)

That is the holiness of God, and it is the holiness he asks of us. It should shape our whole lives and our civilization. We are called to build a civilization of love.



Tuesday of the First Week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 90 (89): 1-2 O Lord, you have been our refuge, from generation to generation; from age to age, you are.

Collect Look upon your family, Lord, that, through the chastening effects of bodily discipline, our minds may be radiant in your presence with the strength of our yearning for you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 34:4-7, 16-19;
Matthew 6:7-15

Jesus said to his disciples, When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us

our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:7-15)

The Lord's Prayer

Inasmuch as our passage today contains our Lord's answer to his disciples' request that he teach them how to pray, there is no substitute for it as the *principal* prayer of the Christian. It was occasioned by the disciples seeing our Lord himself at prayer, so it obviously reflects our Lord's own prayer, and draws the disciple into it. The first thing that our Lord teaches about the prayer of the one who looks to him as the Teacher, is that it is simple and direct. It is very different from the prayer of "the pagans," who "think they will be heard because of their many words." That is to say, the further we are from a knowledge of the true God, the more cumbersome and indirect will our prayer be. God seems far off and so it seems difficult to make oneself heard by him. It is a common experience that people who are *not*

especially close to each other are instinctively concerned if the conversation falls silent. Things seem awkward if this happens. Words must be kept up, whereas between those who are close – say, between a mother and her son, or between loving spouses – *words* can be few, but the two are close. They wish to be with one another, they walk together, and little is *said*. *Words* are simple and direct, even few. But the *communication* may be constant and deep. Our Lord reveals that God is our Father, our dear Father – *Abba!* – and we must speak to him as such. We may speak to him in a way very similar to the way of Jesus, and this immediately manifests a difference from other religions. The *Koran* never refers to God as our *Father*, whereas Jesus Christ is continually doing this, and he teaches his disciples to do the same – with this difference, that he addresses God as "my Father," while teaching us to address him as "our Father." On one occasion the Jews picked up stones to stone our Lord because he referred to God as his own father, thus making himself equal to God. So it is that we are to pray filled with an awareness of our filial relationship with God our heavenly Father. We speak to him simply, with words that are simple,

even few – but heartfelt and to the point. The words our Lord provides us with are sacred, iconic, and in every way a model for all prayer.

There is a further point. It is that the Lord's Prayer, given to us in our passage today, is to be considered as an implicit summary of our Lord's teaching and therefore of the Gospel itself. The Prayer came from the heart of our Lord, and so it must express his teaching. This teaching, therefore, ought be used to interpret the Prayer itself. For instance, when we ask God our Father that he give us our daily bread, what "bread" would our Lord have had most in mind? He would have meant the "bread" that provides our daily physical sustenance, but most of all the heavenly Bread which gives life to the world and by means of which we live forever. That is the Bread which has come down from heaven, as he teaches in the Gospel of St John. That Bread is himself, and more specifically, his flesh, given for the life of the world. Our "daily bread," is above all the Eucharist. As Tertullian writes, the Lord's Prayer is the "summary of the whole Gospel," and we ought strive to understand it, and invest it with the content of the Gospel. It

ought also express our daily fidelity to the Gospel, asking the grace to live according to the Gospel. In this respect, there is a most notable element in the teaching of Jesus Christ which is particularly hard to accept and understand by those who do not give their allegiance to him. I refer to the teaching of Jesus about forgiveness. We are to forgive unceasingly – not seven times but seventy times seven (Matt 18: 21-22) – and it is to be from the heart. "So my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from the heart," our Lord warns at the end of his parable (Matt 18: 35). So it is that at the end of telling his disciples what to pray for and how to pray it (i.e., with simplicity), our Lord emphasises especially the promise to forgive that the Prayer includes. "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." He immediately adds his warning: "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matt 6: 7-15).

Let us love the Lord's Prayer! Paradoxically, there is a certain danger in knowing it well and in having a great familiarity with it. The danger is expressed in the old saying that "familiarity breeds contempt" – which is simply to say that we can become casual about the Lord's Prayer. St Thomas Aquinas referred to it as "the perfect prayer" and the Church's liturgical tradition has always used its text – in fact, the text of Matthew in our passage today, rather than the briefer one provided by Luke. Let us cherish this prayer and endow it with the meaning of the entire Gospel, learning to pray it more and more perfectly till the very last, when we leave this life with it on our lips.

A Second Reflection: (Isaiah 55:10-11)

True success Real success: this is man's ideal in life. We all hope that our lives will be successful. In some cultures, failure is almost unbearable. But notions vary as to what success consists of. A man may "succeed" in his career, but in the process "fail" in some other way, such as in family life. So what is success and what is the way to it? Hundreds of years before the coming of our Lord, through the

prophet Isaiah God spoke of the "success" of his word: "As the rain and the snow come down from the heavens and do not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and bread for the eating, so the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do" (Isaiah 55: 10-11). Whatever may be the apparent success of some things in human life and the failure of others, the success that God wants to see is the fulfilment of his word. True success occurs when his word achieves what it was sent to do. The Word of God came among us in Person – in the Person of Jesus Christ, and he succeeded in what he was sent to do. He was sent to save the world, and he did so by his obedience unto death, which involved apparent "failure." What then will success in life consist of? It will consist in uniting ourselves with the Person who is God's Word, Jesus Christ, the One who was successful beyond imagining. Our success in life will come from following in his footsteps, in hearing the word of God as he did and putting it into practice, whatever be the cost.

So let us indeed aim at success, but let us have a clear and correct idea of what God our Father has revealed to be true success and the way to attain it.



Wednesday of the First Week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 90 (89): 1-2 O Lord, you have been our refuge, from generation to generation; from age to age, you are.

Collect Look upon your family, Lord, that, through the chastening effects of bodily discipline, our minds may be radiant in your presence with the strength of our yearning for you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 18-19;
 Luke 11:29-32

As the crowds increased, Jesus said, This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now

one greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. (Luke 11: 29-32)

The Heart of Man In our Gospel passage today our Lord makes a sombre observation. "This is a wicked generation," he said. "It asks for a miraculous sign." The context of this is provided earlier in the chapter, and it follows our Lord's teaching to his disciples on prayer (Luke 11: 1-13). We read that "he had just cast out a devil which was dumb," and there is a somewhat mixed response among the crowds. While "the multitudes were filled with amazement," nevertheless "some of them said, It is through Beelzebub, the prince of devils, that he casts the devils out, while others, to put him to the test, would have him show a sign from heaven" (Luke 11: 14-16). So within this general amazement, there was a significant element who refused faith in our Lord, some attributing to him demonic association, others requiring of him further signs – this time from heaven. Our Lord could

"read their thoughts" (11:17), and he proceeded to deal with these reactions, firstly with the question of the devils, and secondly with the request for heavenly signs. Our passage today (Luke 11: 29-32) is Christ's comment on those who demanded more evidence than he chose to give. Inasmuch as our Lord speaks of "this generation" asking for "a sign" this would seem to have been a general tendency. That is to say, the tendency among the multitudes was to require more signs from heaven from our Lord, and we remember that as our Lord's public ministry extended in time he withdrew more and more from working multitudes of miracles. We read that he increasingly required of those he healed that they not broadcast the fact, and he withdrew to places of retreat, but despite this his miracles were noised abroad. It seems the miracles were not leading to faith, but simply to the demand for more miracles – signs from heaven. A supreme instance of this was Herod himself, who was delighted to meet our Lord at his Passion because he wanted to see a miracle worked. Our Lord's response to this clamour for miracles was devastating: it was due to wickedness. He refused even to speak to Herod.

So as the multitude increased around him he told them that the demand for "signs" was due to moral fault. It was due to a wicked heart that refused faith when faith was clearly due. Our Lord pointed to examples from Scripture of faith in pagans, gentiles, who responded in faith to God's gifts present in his representatives, who were far inferior to him. "The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here" (Luke 11: 29-32). The Queen of the South was a gentile, a pagan, but she responded to the God-given wisdom of Solomon, and came from "the ends of the earth" to learn from it. She did not ask for further signs from heaven. The "men of Nineveh" were notoriously pagans, gentiles, but at the mere preaching of Jonah they repented in sackcloth and ashes and their great city was spared. They did not demand further signs from heaven, but recognized that the message of Jonah came from God. All of this was due to their

good hearts. Their heart was such that they – the Queen of the south and the men of Nineveh – immediately received with faith the word of the one to whom they were listening. A good heart is enough to discern the heavenly origin of the teaching of Jesus Christ, for in him a greater than Solomon and Jonah is present. All this is to say that, as our Lord expresses it in one of his parables, the seed must fall in good soil if it is to produce the harvest of which it is capable. If the heart is wicked, signs from heaven will be of no use. In another of our Lord's parables, Abraham says of the brothers of the rich man buried in Hell, that even if someone should rise from the dead, it would make no difference to them, because of the state of their hearts.

God is all-powerful. He can do anything, and he does do marvellous things even if they are often unseen. As our Lord says elsewhere, all things are possible for God. But God's saving plan depends on our willingness to accept him and his will. It depends on the state of our hearts. We must be properly disposed for his word. Let us place our faith in Christ the Redeemer of man, entrusting our minds

and hearts to the care of his grace, asking that he mould us in his likeness. Let us not place conditions on God, but accept his will, knowing that in his will lies our salvation.



Thursday of the First Week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 5: 2-3 To my words give ear, O Lord; give heed to my sighs. Attend to the sound of my cry, my King and my God.

Collect Bestow on us, we pray, O Lord, a spirit of always pondering on what is right and of hastening to carry it out, and, since without you we cannot exist, may we be enabled to live according to your will. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Esther C:12, 14-16, 23-25; Psalm 138:1-3, 7c-8;
Matthew 7:7-12

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how

to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:7-12)

Pray For It! There are some fundamental problems in religion, problems that can undermine religious faith if they are not resolved adequately. One such problem is the thought that religion is unnecessary, that it makes little difference to life, and life can get on just as well – and perhaps more efficiently – without it. There are the same problems confronting both the religious person and the person without religion, and all too often it seems that the person without religion deals with life more realistically. He makes greater headway. He competes with greater vigour, and grasps the nettle with greater resolution. He makes more money, he advances in his career more quickly, he has fewer concerns to perplex him, and he notices that the religious person seems to rely fruitlessly on prayer while he himself gets to his chosen destination. All this may be a caricature of the

weak-headed religious person as against the hard-headed man of the world, and we need not delay here to correct commonly held images. The point I am introducing is the suspicion by the pragmatic achiever that religion is in the last analysis unnecessary and, if anything, a dead weight. Its most characteristic activity is prayer, and what is the use of prayer in the pressing business of life? An earthquake hits Haiti and an entire city is engulfed in ruin and tragedy. The world mobilizes and the business of rebuilding begins. The important thing is action – and what has religion to do with this? Religion is peripheral to the business of life as exemplified in a tragedy such as this, and prayer is even more peripheral. What difference will prayer make to the situation? Nothing! – so it is deemed. A drought extends its claws across a vast swathe of land and for years the country suffers. Yes, communities go through the motion of prayers for rain, but what is the use of that? Ah! The rain comes. But that is a coincidence – it would have come anyway. Prayer keeps up the spirits of people as might an opiate, but it makes little difference to the course of the world. For the canny and properly

modern man and woman, prayer is just a private, soft-headed indulgence.

Now, of course, in the lives of particular individuals prayer can be all this, but on the other hand it is surprising to see the number of competent achievers who do live lives of daily prayer by personal conviction. But setting aside such facts of the case, the Christian's principal motive for a strong life of prayer, and in particular the prayer of petition, is the word of Jesus Christ. Whatever *we* may tend to think, *he*, through whom all things were made, urges us to pray for what we need. It looks as if God has made himself to depend, to an extent, on man's prayers for man's own needs. That is to say, so insistent on the importance of prayer is our Lord, that it seems as if in the plan of God our prayers are an integral component of its fulfilment. How little do we understand of the foundations of visible reality! A tiny shift in a rock can lead to a massive landslide with appalling tragedies in its wake. Consider what might the prayers of a mother every day for the material and spiritual welfare of her family have done to prevent that

possible tiny shift, which never happened. Again, an unseen Angel prompts a thought in a driver to slow at a certain point. A careering car driven by an intoxicated young man with several young passengers swerves precisely where the car would have been had it not suddenly slowed. The driver of the slowed car has had the habit of a daily prayer to his Guardian Angel that he will guard and guide him. Now then – what does our Lord say about prayer? He wants us to pray for what we need, and to pray with confidence in the love and power of God. All things are in the hands of God, and who are we, after the word of Christ, to disregard the power of prayer? "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7: 7-12). What could be plainer than this, and who could be so foolish as to disregard it? But disregard it we commonly do. We do not deny what our Lord promises here, but we tend to disregard it, and quietly to get on with life without it. We commonly think religion is a little bit useless, and especially its most distinctive activity – the prayer of petition.

Let us resolve to pray and pray for what we need – doing so in the presence of God. If in the presence of God we do not think we *should* be praying unceasingly for something, then that may be a sign that we do not think it is in accord with his will. But if in the presence of God we think it would be good to pray for something, or even that we *should* be praying for it, then let us pray for it constantly, and never lose heart at apparent delays. But of course, we pray knowing that God knows best. In his wisdom he may choose to answer our prayer in a different way from that requested. But if this is so, then it will have been the best possible answer to our prayer.



Friday of the First Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24): 17-18 Set me free from my distress, O Lord. See my lowliness and suffering, and take away all my sins.

Collect Grant that your faithful, O Lord, we pray, may be so conformed to the paschal observances, that the bodily discipline now solemnly begun may bear fruit in the souls of all. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 18:21-28; Psalm 130:1-8;
Matthew 5:20-26

Jesus said, I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will

be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:20-26)

The Work The discovery of *tools* at archaeological digs is usually a standard indicator of the one-time presence there of human beings. But in recent decades there have been many who have argued that various *animals* use tools – especially those animals which are close to man in their DNA. For instance, in their DNA, apes and men have some 97 % in common. There are scientists who claim that various species of apes

in effect use tools. Therefore, they think, there is but a difference of degree (in animality) between man and the ape, rather than a radical difference in kind. Setting aside the question of what it is to use something as a tool, I mention this merely to introduce yet another matter: *work*. There is a feature common to animals and man: they engage in activity that serves their needs. The lion sets out in the morning and the whole day may be engaged in gaining its food. Very many human beings are simultaneously engaged in the same project. Do they both, then, engage in "work" – the "work" of gaining sustenance? Just as with the use of tools, do they both really "work"? Just as we say that the animal does not use *tools*, so we normally say that the animal does not do a "*work*," whereas man does indeed "work." What is it, then, to "work," which makes of it an activity distinctive to man? This is not the moment to explore this philosophically, but one feature of "work" could be mentioned immediately which would seem to make of it a human activity. The animal does not have the capacity to choose between its activities, nor does it choose the degree of energy it invests in the activity. Both are

governed by instinct. The lion on the hunt *must* hunt, unless its instinct leads it to desist. It is a captive of its instinct, and so it is not responsible for its actions. Moreover, its degree of effort in the hunt is entirely dependent on factors governing it, such as instinct, immediate strength, circumstances and so forth. What the lion does is the result of its instincts and circumstances. Man, though, may freely choose, among possible works, which of them is to his liking or best interest, and he is free to devote maximum strength to the work, or little at all. We may say that the choice of work and choice of effort applied to his work is distinctive of man. It is *he* who does the work, not his "instincts."

What has this to do with what our Lord tells us in the Gospel today? Ah! Much indeed. Our Lord begins with this warning: "I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." Christ is saying that we must aim high in the matter of righteousness. Our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and

the teachers of the law. So he is telling us that every man and woman has a great "work" to do in life and he must deliberately choose to do that work. Man cannot just drift along. He cannot be governed by self-interest, by "instinct" as it were, or by any other circumstance which, broadly, may govern other living things. He must choose among works in life and he must choose the one necessary work which is "righteousness", or the holiness of Jesus Christ. He must *work* at being very good. This is the supreme work and it is a work of deliberate choice. Included in this choice is a further choice – the degree of effort to be put into it. There are those who make their health, their popularity, their careers or their wealth the supreme work of choice. They include the work of righteousness as something largely incidental. This means that they also choose to put little real effort into righteousness. Christ says that the righteousness which we must choose has to be of a high order, one that surpasses "that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law." Most especially it means cultivating with energy and persistence a true religion of the heart, with the heart of Christ being the model. It means working at love and

forgiveness. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:20-26).

Every man and woman born into this world has a magnificent project ahead. The project is personal holiness, a project that must be deliberately chosen and then sought with all one's powers. The attainment of goodness is the supreme work of personal freedom, and its most singular manifestation. It will never come as a result of mere instinct, and it will never come unless the choice is made to give to the work one's very best. Indeed, it is commanded by God that we make

this choice and carry it through. We must love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves. The grace has been won - let us to it, then!

Saturday of the First Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 19 (18): 8 The law of the Lord is perfect; it revives the soul. The decrees of the Lord are steadfast; they give wisdom to the simple.

Collect Turn our hearts to you, eternal Father, and grant that, seeking always the one thing necessary and carrying out works of charity, we may be dedicated to your worship. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 26:16 19; Psalm 119:1 2, 4 5, 7 8;

Matthew 5:43 48

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

Love Wonder is an important act of the mind and there are things in life we ought wonder about. Plato in his *Theaetetus* wrote that the origin of philosophy is "wonder" – in the sense of 'puzzlement' or 'perplexity' (155c d). Aristotle too, sees wonder as the origin of philosophy: "For men were first led to study philosophy, as indeed they are today, by wonder....they took to philosophy to escape ignorance ...” (*Metaphysics* Book 1,2: 982b). Wonder leads us to consider life and the world more deeply. Consider some of the things one might

wonder about, such as the very existence of things. The world exists, but why is there anything at all? We exist – but why is that? In January 2010 a massive earthquake convulsed Haiti, and incalculable suffering ensued. There is so much evil and suffering in the world. Why is life and reality such, as to involve so much evil? Extending the point, there are students of animal life who are shocked by the scale of brutality and suffering perpetrated among *animal* species. The relentless pursuit of a small bird by an eagle and its lethal attack on it seems to belie the notion that the world comes from and is sustained by a loving Creator. But now, there is another thing to wonder about. Yes, there is much evil and suffering everywhere, but despite this there is the wonderful fact of love. There are amazing fountains of love everywhere. Haiti falls amid the crash of the earthquake and the world scrambles *to help*. There is *love* amid the evil and suffering. Or again, a profoundly handicapped young man is constantly assisted with sensitive attention by his widowed father. This care goes on for years, and is unfailing. Again, an elderly parent is in a nursing home, lost in her mental dementia. She recognizes no one and says nothing. But

every day she is attended by her loving son. So, let us *wonder* at the phenomenon of love! I propose that love is the greatest thing in the world. It is love that must be noticed, treasured, admired, protected, cherished and resolutely helped to flourish. Love is absolutely indispensable.

As a matter of fact, it has been revealed to us that love is the heart, the soul, the core and the source of all reality, visible and invisible. Were we able to plunge to the very depths of all that there is, and rest our hand on the very first element from which everything else flows, we would touch love. Evil is not at the heart of things, but love. I am referring to the Creator. God, the inspired Scriptures teach us, is love. There is one Creator of all, and he is love. So much is he love that, while he is one in *being*, he is a *communion* of three divine *Persons*. God is a loving communion. He is love in his life and in his activity. He creates out of love and leaves his loving imprint on all that he does. Somehow, large and numerous weeds appeared in the field – and an enemy had done it. But love is the start of everything. Love

sustains the world, and love will be the final term of the world. The only final evil will be to have turned one's back on this love – and it is within our power to do so. We come from a loving God and if we live in union with him we shall go to him at the end. There is, then, a momentous choice facing every person. Shall I choose to love, or shall I choose not to? Our Lord is very clear about this. We must strive to become perfect in love, the love that he manifested and which, by the sacrifice of his life, he made possible for us. He has won for us the grace to grow mightily in love. "Be perfect" he says in today's Gospel, "as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). We must strive to imitate God our loving Father, loving even those who inflict suffering and evil upon us. Evil comes, suffering comes, and this evil and suffering all too often has its origins in evil human hearts. But our response must be that of love. Love is the most beautiful fact of the world, and we must have it flourish. "I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends

rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5: 43-48). Love is the imperative project of every man and woman.

Amid all the din of suffering and evil in the world, and amid the numerous instances of love that are present amid this evil, there is something most beautiful that appears aloft amid the haze. It is the Crucified One, hanging from the nails driven into him by the sin of the world. He hangs there because of his love, and that love has broken the power of sin. By the grace his sacrifice won for us we must aim to become like him. This means aiming for the holiness that is the love of God. God is love and our true life consists in sharing in God's life of love. This we do by loving and following Jesus Christ, Son of God and Redeemer of man.



Second Sunday of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26): 8-9 Of you my heart has spoken,
Seek his face. It is your face, O Lord, that I seek; hide not your face
from me.

Or:

Cf. Ps 25 (24): 6, 2, 22 Remember your compassion, O Lord, and
your merciful love, for they are from of old. Let not our enemies exult
over us. Redeem us, O God of Israel, from all our distress.

Collect O God, who have commanded us to listen to your beloved
Son, be pleased, we pray, to nourish us inwardly by your word, that,
with spiritual sight made pure, we may rejoice to behold your
glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns
with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 15:5-12.17-18; Psalm 119:1 2, 4 5, 7 8;
Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 9: 28-36

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters- one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. (He did not know what he was saying.) While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him. When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen. (Luke 9:28-36)

Hope

Perhaps the most striking thing about reality is its variety. Everywhere there are differences. Look at a garden, look at the animals in a zoo, look at any group of persons, look at a family, look at even a pair of twins and their characters. One sees many differences. The differences among the things that make up visible creation are not only of kind but of degree within the various kinds. Though all men are of the one kind, who could calculate the number of differences among individuals within humankind? Particularly notable are the differences in talent, in capacity. All his life one man does the most humdrum of things and, though he may be happy, never achieves anything beyond the ordinary. Another man arises from obscurity and is in sight of becoming, even if briefly, nearly the master of the world. Where did Napoleon Bonaparte come from? He began an obscure Corsican from off the coast of Italy. Yet by the age of 35 he was Emperor of France and within five more years was master of Europe. He fell and ended his days with nothing, but his talent was extraordinary. Seventy-two years after the death of Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler was born in obscurity in

Austria. By the age of forty-four he was head of the German state and on his way to a despicable career of carnage and blood that brought death and injury to untold numbers all over the world. In certain respects he had extraordinary talent – especially in his oratory. We can think of numerous achievers in history, including some who were saints, and others who were filled with evil intent. In all high achievers there is one common element: *hope*. This is our point here, in speaking of the enormous variety among persons. *All* must *hope*. Hope is not exclusive to high achievers who have great talent, for even in those of very ordinary talent it is essential that there be *hope*. Hope is a fundamental human requisite. The ordinary person who in his obscurity may be living a beautiful life, humbly raising his several children, day by day engaged in a tedious round of humdrum activity such as delivering bread or stacking provisions, and ending his days having done his best at his uninteresting tasks, must live in hope. Were he not to have hoped, he would have long since given up on life. If there is not hope, all is hopeless.

There is, however, a grand undertaking that is ahead of every man and woman, be they high or low in talent. Both the distinguished and the ordinary must make this undertaking his own. What he makes of it will depend on his calling and his spiritual talent, but make it his own he must. That undertaking is the work of personal holiness in Christ. It is the common undertaking of all who are baptized. Now, in this, just as with everything, hope is a fundamental prerequisite. Each must have a high hope of attaining this goal if he is ever to attain it. If he has little hope of it, he will not give it the energy and dedication it requires. This hope is a God-given virtue, imparted at our baptism, by which we desire the kingdom of heaven that our Lord announced and established. By means of this supernatural hope we desire eternal life as our happiness, and the virtues that are necessary for it. The foundation of this hope, a hope that has to be high indeed, is the trust we place in Christ and his promises rather than our own strength, together with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Only the grace of Jesus Christ can take us to holiness, but we must apply ourselves to the work – and for this application we need to have a great *hope*. This hope is

the gift of God, as is our faith in Jesus Christ and as is our love for him. This virtue that is God's gift builds on the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man and woman. We *naturally* hope for happiness, and this natural hope drives our efforts and decisions during life. The hope that is supernatural and specifically Christian is the gift of the Holy Spirit. It *completes and gives focus* to the natural hope of every human heart. Buoyed up by this hope, we are kept from choosing to sin and acts of selfishness and are led to holiness, which is the true happiness of man. Abraham *hoped*, and we are his children in the faith. In the beatitudes of Jesus Christ (in Matthew and Luke) our hopes are raised to heaven, and the grace won for us by the Passion and Death of Christ sustains our hope. Thus hope becomes the steadfast anchor of the soul and our weapon in our spiritual struggle.

Our Gospel today (Luke 9: 28-36) places before us the transfiguration of Christ, manifesting his glory. It shows forth what we are called to hope for. With the grace of God for which we ought pray, let us maintain high hopes of attaining our true end, which is union with

Christ in his glory. This we attain by obeying the will of God in union with Jesus who attained his glory through suffering. We hope for union with the Bridegroom in the glory of heaven. As St Teresa of Avila wrote, "Hope, O my soul, hope!" Let us pray for the virtue of hope, and never let it fade away.



Monday of the Second Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 26 (25): 11-12 Redeem me, O Lord, and have mercy on me. My foot stands on level ground; I will bless the Lord in the assembly.

Collect O God, who have taught us to chasten our bodies for the healing of our souls, enable us, we pray, to abstain from all sins, and strengthen our hearts to carry out your loving commands. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Daniel 9:4-10; Psalm 78; Luke 6:36-38

Jesus said to his disciples, Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your

lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Luke 6:36-38)

Loving our Neighbour One of the many disputes that have arisen over revealed doctrine has concerned the results of the original Fall of man. The priest Pelagius (a contemporary of Augustine and Jerome), – himself troubled by Augustine's (and others') theology of divine grace – was accused of denying the doctrine of original sin. He was accused of teaching, in effect, that man could attain salvation by his own earnest efforts. Eventually Augustine summoned the Council of Carthage in 418 and condemned the teaching of Pelagius – and this condemnation was in due course accepted by the Church. Catholic doctrine insists on the Fall of man and his need of Christ's redemption. He cannot be saved without the grace of Christ. However, subsequently the grand dispute concerned the *extent* of the depravity caused by the Fall. The Catholic Church insists that while man is profoundly wounded by the Fall he is not utterly deprived of goodness. To an extent, he can genuinely love. To an extent, he can be unselfish. But of course

whatever be the natural capacity in fallen man to be good and loving, it is not sufficient to regain the full and saving friendship of God. To be fully and properly reconciled with God there was needed the Sacrifice of Christ, the effects of which must be brought to each individual by the gift of the Holy Spirit. By himself man cannot attain fully union with God – he is like the bird that has been shot in the wing. While he is not by nature spiritually dead, he can only struggle along on the ground. So it is that while we see some striking displays of goodness and love in the world, there are serious limits to it. It is vitiated by much self-seeking. There is a reluctance to be compassionate and merciful in practice. The practice of what we might call natural religion – that religion which naturally arises from the heart of man and which is distinct from revealed religion – is not *notably charitable*. It is not distinguished by concern for the needy and mercy towards the suffering. It is not especially forgiving. It is often very vengeful. It attains the level that we would expect of fallen natural man.

Now, the religion revealed by Jesus Christ places love towards one's neighbour and goodness towards others at the very centre of its practice. It is *notably* charitable. One's level of true religion is measured by one's level of practical love towards others. It does not replace one's love for God and Christ, but it is a measure of it. This may be said to be one distinctive feature of revealed religion, and in the process it reveals what God is like. So much is God himself love, that he cannot accept a religion that is not loving towards those whom he himself loves. And who does God love with special predilection? The God who is rich in mercy loves in a special sense those who are in need. He identifies with them, and absolutely insists that those who wish to serve and honour him must themselves put on the mind and heart that is his. That is to say we must aim to be compassionate, merciful and "good" to those in need. But of course, as was said earlier, we are profoundly wounded by the effects on our nature by the original Fall of man in sin. Of ourselves we cannot imitate the compassion and mercy of God towards others to the extent that is proper and necessary. We need to be redeemed and sanctified by the grace of Jesus

Christ. By our own daily effort and most especially by having recourse to this grace, we can put on the mind of Christ and become more and more "religious" – united to God – in the sense intended by our all-loving and all-merciful Father. Thus it is that our Lord tells us in today's Gospel *"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you"* (Luke 6: 36-38). If we wish to love God we must love our neighbour, and for this reason the Christian saint is a person who is distinguished by his love for neighbour. Our Lord warns that in the final judgment whatever we do to the least, he will regard as having been done to him.

Let us never imagine that concern for our neighbour and in particular for the neediest of our neighbours, is but one fruit of religion, an incidental advantage that religion brings to society. Concern for

neighbour is at the heart of revealed religion, and it is a principal moment or locale of the service of the unseen God. God identifies with the lowliest and the most needy, and if we wish to love him, we must love and serve the neediest. God will judge our love for him according to the measure of our love for our fellow man. Let us pray for the grace to get this right.

Tuesday of the Second Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 13 (12): 4-5 Give light to my eyes lest I fall asleep in death, lest my enemy say: I have overcome him.

Collect Guard your Church, we pray, O Lord, in your unceasing mercy, and, since without you mortal humanity is sure to fall, may we be kept by your constant helps from all harm and directed to all that brings salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 1: 10.16-20; Psalm 49; Matthew 23: 1-12

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the market places and to have men call them 'Rabbi'. But you are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have only one teacher and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your 'father', for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'master', for you have one Master, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23: 1-12)

Humility Years ago a prominent politician in Australia made the remark during an interview on television that "life was not meant to be easy." His observation was derided by the press and it haunted him for the rest of his political career. But one minute's thought ought make it obvious that this brief statement is true. No matter how one lives, life will not be "easy." There will be difficulties no matter what path one takes, whether it is the path of virtue or the path of vice. Its more obvious application is in respect to virtue. To be good will not be easy, even though it will bring happiness. The same is to be said of religion. As the Old Testament book of Sirach states, "My son, when you come to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for trials" (2:1). One of the trials of authentic religion is the struggle for humility. It has been revealed that at the beginning of mankind, man was tempted to put himself in God's place: "you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad," the Serpent insinuated (Genesis 3:5). Man fell into this temptation and lost his condition of friendship with God and full integration of his powers. He became profoundly inclined to assuming the place of God. That is to say, he became strongly inclined to be

proud, and it was a great struggle to be humble. If he is not awake to this fallen condition and does not resist it with vigilance and the help of God, he will inevitably be a proud person. He will live in the unreality of thinking that he is a much better man than what he is. While he may not admit it to himself, in effect he will think he is somewhat on a par with God himself and will arrogantly ignore the commands of God. He will attempt to construct his own Tower of Babel in life, tending to think he can attain full influence and security. He will gradually decide for himself what is right and what is wrong, calling right what is in fact wrong, and vice versa. All will be vitiated by the persistence in his own life of the original temptation, which is pride. It is a capital sin and leads to death.

It is this pride which our Lord unmasks in many of the religious leaders of the people. They were leaders of religion, and yet in their spirit they were not religious. The reason for this was their pride and their seeking of personal glory precisely in their religion. In their lives they were not giving honour and glory to God but seeking it for

themselves. *"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the market places and to have men call them 'Rabbi'"* (Matt 23: 1-12). Our Lord does not condemn all "the teachers of the law and the Pharisees" who "sit in Moses' seat." Further, he actually *confirms* and supports their office, telling his hearers to *"obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach."* What our Lord did was to warn his hearers not to make of the practice of revealed religion a means of self-glorification and adulation. Fundamentally, the danger consists in a violation of the very first of the Ten Commandments, which is that we acknowledge God to be God, and not to allow anything or anyone to occupy his place. The danger is, as it was in the beginning, that we ourselves secretly and almost without realizing the temptation, seek to occupy the place of God. It is profoundly demonic. It was the sin of those angels who rebelled against God in heaven. They would not serve because they wished to

be like God. It was the temptation the demon presented to our first parents, and it was manifested in Satan's temptation to Christ himself. "*All this power will I give to you and the glory of them. If you worship me, all will be yours*" (Luke 4: 6-7). Satan was attempting to entice Christ with the prospect of glory from the entire world, so that he himself would be worshipped. Every time we take a step along the path of pride and self-glorification, we are heading along the path of Satan. We may not traverse that road to its end, but that is the path he trod and treads.

By contrast, the path of Christ is that of humility. As St Paul writes, Christ had the very form and nature of God and yet he divested himself of this glory and became as we are, in the likeness of man. Indeed, he took a path that was even humbler, becoming obedient to death on a cross (Philippians 2: 6-7). How different from the path and the temptation presented by Satan, who wants man to aspire to be a god! Let us study the humility of Jesus Christ who invited us to learn from him, "*for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for*

your souls. My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28). Humility is the key to religion and to life.

A Second Reflection (Matthew 23:1-12)

Humility At one point in his book *A Grammar of Assent*, Cardinal Newman marvels at the awareness possessed by animals and remarks that it is a great mystery. I remember seeing one dog which for a brief time had to live with a visiting dog which friends of the family brought with them. Just to prove it was the "top dog" it dug up all the bones which over a period of time it had hidden. It then displayed them before the other dog, keeping guard over them. The other dog barked at it from a distance in frustration. The dog with the bones was secure in being the "top dog." I remember another dog that could not bear to see its companion dog being petted and given attention by the masters of the house. It grew savage every time it saw this favour being accorded the other dog. It wanted to be the "top dog." That is to say, it is *not notably human* to desire status and the esteem of others, to aim to be exalted in their sight. It is part of human longing, but animals do this

too in their fashion. The temptation is to spend most of one's life trying to be the “top dog.” To achieve this status clearly cannot in itself give intrinsic greatness to a human being. If man's measure is God, then to be seeking status and exaltation in the eyes of men is to be unlike God, because Christ humbled himself and became as men are, and lowlier still – even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). Further, our Lord said, he who sees me sees the Father. So the Father is humble. Our Lord asked that we learn from him who is meek and humble of heart. Today's Gospel is very relevant to this point. *"The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted"* (Matthew 23:1-12) – and God is the greatest.

Let us understand that the humble person is the one who is like God. God our Father is meek, compassionate and humble, and was revealed in the humility of his Son, our Lord. If we wish to be exalted, the path is through being like God, which is to say by humbling

ourselves. Let us ask the grace of the Holy Spirit, who in Christ is the Spirit of humility.



Wednesday of the Second Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37): 22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord!

My God, be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord,
my strong salvation!

Collect Keep your family, O Lord, schooled always in good works,
and so comfort them with your protection here as to lead them
graciously to gifts on high. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God,
for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 18: 18-20; Psalm 30; Matthew 20: 17-28

*Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples
aside and said to them, We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of
Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the
law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the
Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he
will be raised to life! Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus*

with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him. What is it you want? he asked. She said, Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom. You don't know what you are asking, Jesus said to them. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? We can, they answered. Jesus said to them, You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father. When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:17-28)

The Glory

There is something admirable about the approach to our Lord by the mother of the sons of Zebedee in our Gospel today. In

his parables our Lord had given various images of the Kingdom of Heaven – that Kingdom of which he was the Messiah and King. Just before our passage today, our Lord speaks of those who will be first and last in the Kingdom. His parable describes the owner of the vineyard (the Master or Ruler of the Kingdom) hiring workers for his vineyard. As the owner, he will at the end reward each for his service, and he warns that while "many" will be called, "few" will be chosen. That is to say, by no means all will attain what they presume to expect. There will be surprises, for "they shall be first who were last, and they shall be last who were first". But this meant that there would be some who would be "first", and the mother of the sons of Zebedee would have heard this. She was determined that her beloved sons should be among those "first" in the Kingdom. She had generous and ardent sons. Our Lord nicknamed them "Boanerges," sons of thunder. I like to think of our Lord, in his love for them, good-naturedly teasing them for their volatile love for him. On one occasion they wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans for their discourtesy to our Lord. They were among our Lord's very first disciples, his special companions

together with Simon Peter, and according to St Paul were the pillars of the infant Church at Jerusalem. We read in our passage today that on the way "*up to Jerusalem*" *Jesus warned the Twelve that "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"* Our Lord is repeating to them that he is going to have a terrible death, and very soon. Then he will rise again. Now, it is *then*, after his having said *this*, that the mother of the sons of Zebedee presents her request. There is something truly admirable in their asking this of our Lord when his very death, in horrible form, has just been announced.

They loved our Lord, and were utterly convinced that he was the promised Messiah, the King who would possess the eternal Kingship, the throne of David that would last forever. His glory would come. This faith in them is admirable, and our Lord, who could read the hearts of men, knew their mettle. How different did they turn out

from Judas Iscariot! I suspect that our Lord's talk of his coming death aroused complete disillusion and even a secret disgust in Judas. It occasioned a further draining away of his allegiance to our Lord. Not so with the sons of Zebedee. Jesus was the promised King, and his Kingdom and his glory would come – but we see that despite their faith and their abandon to our Lord, they did not yet *get it*, as we might put it colloquially. They wanted to be among the first, and indeed, at our Lord's right and left in his Kingdom. *"You do not know what you are asking, Jesus said to them. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"*

We may presume that they had some idea that difficulties would be part and parcel of being with our Lord in his glory. Still, it is clear – on our Lord's word – that they did not know what they were asking. They did not understand that just as the Son of Man must needs greatly suffer in order to enter his glory, so must they. Our Lord was blunt about sharing in his glory. They must drink "his" cup – the cup of the *Suffering Servant*. The others of the Twelve also shared in the illusion, for when they heard James and John attempting to obtain from our Lord this special favour in advance, they were hostile to the two

brothers. They too wanted the top places, places of command where, after the manner of the rulers of the world, they would possess glory and be served. It was an all-too human image of the glory of the Kingdom, one that reflected the kingdoms of this world and the aspirations of fallen man. They needed to understand that *"whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:17-28).

The great point of the passage is our Lord's response to their question. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" he asked. In their love and generosity, they immediately said, "We can." Our Lord saw that they had it in them to follow him to the end, and we may presume that he answered their request precisely by granting them the grace to drink his "cup." That is the true meaning of being at his right and at his left. We are called not to occupy the top places in glory, but to stand close to Jesus in all the suffering that is entailed in doing the

will of God and serving our brothers. Let us ask Christ for the grace to remain at his right and left in his sufferings so as to share in his glory.

Thursday of the Second Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 139 (138): 23-24 Test me, O God, and know my thoughts. See that my path is not wicked, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Collect O God, who delight in innocence and restore it, direct the hearts of your servants to yourself, that, caught up in the fire of your Spirit, we may be found steadfast in faith and effective in works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; Luke 16:19-31

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich

man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses

and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' (Luke 16: 19-31)

The Poor If we were asked to present in a single snapshot the state of the world in every age, I wonder what snapshots would be produced. There would be many who would, naturally, claim that it is utterly impossible to give in a single image the state of mankind and human society not only in its current situation, but in the broad sweep of history. If a great artist were commissioned to do just this – to come up with a painting that captured the state of human society and its most obvious issues – I wonder what that artist would paint. I suggest that our Lord in our Gospel passage today has provided such an image. It is of the *"rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores."* In every age there has been luxury and misery and a range of conditions of life between these two. In our Lord's own time there were the blind beggars, the

groups of ostracized lepers, the sick and the forgotten, and at the same time there were those wealthy who neglected the needy. We read in the Gospel that when Herod held his birthday party the nobles of the court attended, together with the leading men of Galilee. I wonder whether some of them fitted into the category of the rich man of our Lord's parable who neglected the poor man Lazarus. It is remarked in another passage of the Gospels that some of the Pharisees loved money and they scoffed at our Lord's warning against this love. One might wonder about how they too fitted into this parable. In any case, the world might well be described in terms of this opening image of the parable. There are those who have, and there are those who have not. Those who have not would love to partake of what might fall from the table of those who have, but are unable to. They must lie at the gate, with the dogs coming to lick their sores. Thus they pass their lives in misery.

There are admirable and significant initiatives constantly taken to alleviate the condition of the poor. One only has to think of the likes of Mahatma Ghandi to appreciate the natural goodness of the human

heart, broken by sin though it is. History is dotted by numerous examples of marvellous dedication to those in need, and an admirable sharing of wealth with the many Lazaruses at the gates of those who have. Such examples show that the spark of goodness remained in the heart of man despite his catastrophic moral fall at the beginning. As a result, he is profoundly inclined to selfishness and sin. But at the same time he is drawn by an even deeper law of his being summoning him to a moral grandeur that strives to do what is good, avoid what is evil, and *better the lot of his fellows*. Nevertheless the lamentable situation stands. There is wealth and there is penury within countries and between countries. Evil afflicts very many people. Consider the centuries of slavery and the countless children of God who suffered lives of misery as a result. There were few if any to help them, and we may imagine great numbers who lived lives shrouded in an unchanging darkness. We may take another parallel instance in our own day, the instance of abortion. Millions of human beings at the start of their life's journey are attacked, injured, destroyed precisely in the location where they are meant by the providence of God to be safest – in their mothers'

wombs. It is the first shelter God gives them, and they quickly become the Lazarus of our parable today. The point I am making is that our Lord's opening image in today's parable may be taken to be a true snapshot of the world as it has been during much of its history, and as it is today. What to do about it? – that is the burning question. The answer lies in the rest of the parable. We must help, and this imperative comes from Christ. If we do not we shall be placing ourselves in danger of sharing in the lot of the rich man of the parable. He died and was buried, and in his torment in Hell he could not pass from his side to the other. A great chasm existed between them.

The Christian has a most notable motive for helping the poor, and for overcoming his ingrained and fallen reluctance to part with his possessions for the sake of the needy. Whatever he does to the least and to the neediest, he will have done to Jesus the Lord of lords and the King of kings. It is a principal way of showing love for Jesus. There is as well a tremendous sanction. At the judgment, Christ will remember and bring forward what was done and what was not done to the least of

his brothers. We shall be rewarded or punished accordingly. The saints have been distinguished for their love for Jesus *as present in the poor*. Let us love and serve the poor, then!

A Second Reflection: (Jeremiah 17: 5-10)

Trust in the Lord It is a very sad thing to come across a person who has lost hope. It is the most natural and normal thing to have hope, and we thrive when we have plenty of hope. But the question is, in what do we place our hope? It may be that, without realizing it too clearly, we have been placing our hope in things that in the final analysis will let us down because of their inherently contingent nature. They are "things of flesh". In what are we placing our trust in life – financial success, physical health, plenty of friends? If these fail us, where then will our life and happiness find its support? The prophet Jeremiah tells us that "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord". Such a person's life will never cease to bear fruit – the fruit that

God wants. So we must select and choose what we shall trust in. Let it be the Lord. If however, and perhaps largely unknown to ourselves, we have come to trust in things that we then discover fail us (such as business success, health, friends, or whatever), let that discovery be the occasion for detaching ourselves from that futile object of trust.

Let us then trust more deeply in the Lord. Let the occasion of failure and disappointment become a great opportunity, a moment of grace when we abandon ourselves more completely to the Lord. We must trust in the Lord by deliberate choice and by policy. When what is dear fails us, let us trust in the Lord the more.



Friday of the Second Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30): 2, 5 In you, O Lord, I put my trust, let me never be put to shame; release me from the snare they have hidden for me, for you indeed are my refuge.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, purifying us by the sacred practice of penance, you may lead us in sincerity of heart to attain the holy things to come. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 37:3-4.12-13.17-28; Psalm 104;
Matthew 21:33-43.45-46

Jesus said, Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his

servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them in the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, they replied, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time. Jesus said to them, Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet. (Matthew 21: 33-43. 45-46)

The Vine Buddhism proposes a way to what it regards as life. The Christian religion sets forth a Person. He is the way, just as he is the full truth and life, life in abundance. Pope Paul VI once said that the Christian religion is not a simple matter – he was referring to the immense richness and unending implications of the Christian religion. But in one sense he would have been the first to insist on the simplicity of its essential element. Christianity is about the Person of Christ, and the vocation of the Christian is to live in friendship with Jesus Christ. When the Christian reads the inspired Scriptures, it ought deepen his understanding of Jesus Christ. So then, let us consider our Lord's parable in today's Gospel in view of what it says about *him*. Our Lord situates himself in the context of the history of God's dealings with his chosen people. The people of his choice is his vineyard – and we think of the image of the vineyard used by the prophet Isaiah. *What could I have done that I have not done!* the prophet said, speaking on God's behalf. We think of the history of that divine choice beginning with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob through to the twelve patriarchs, the sons of Jacob. God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and he

had entered into a covenant with them, marvellously renewed and developed in the covenant of Sinai. God was forming a *people* and sending them his prophets to guide and guard them as his own. We may say that this process of choice and formation is encapsulated in our Lord's opening scene of his parable: "*There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower.*" The vineyard was the house of Israel. But those charged with caring for the vineyard neglected their responsibility. "*Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third.*" This was the context of our Lord's reference in the parable to himself.

Observe the dramatic difference in the parable between the servants of the vineyard who are clearly the prophets, and Jesus himself. While they are the landowner's *servants*, he is the landowner's *son*. There is a difference, we may almost say, not in mere degree but

almost in kind. The prophets are the *servants* of God, but Jesus Christ is his *son*. No other prophet spoke of himself – we might even say – so audaciously. Yet repeatedly our Lord spoke of himself in these exalted terms, and in the presence of his determined opponents. There was no one equal to Jesus Christ in terms of his relationship with God: the best of them were but servants of God, whereas he was his very son. So while in the parable our Lord speaks of the judgment that will come upon the leaders of the people and how the vineyard will be taken away from them, the parable also speaks of Jesus Christ. He is the privileged son, the only son of the master of the vineyard. Moreover, he is destined to be cast out of the vineyard by the tenants and killed. So our Lord is pointing not only to his unique status and relationship with God, but to the mysterious destiny that is his, despite his exalted status. So as we read the parable, let us think of the one who is the son of the master of the vineyard. There is a second extraordinary point intimately connected with the son. The vineyard of the house of Israel in the plan of God became the vine that is the Church. *The vine is the son*. "I am the vine," our Lord said to his disciples at the Last Supper, "and you are

the branches.” So an altogether new relationship has been established by God between his son and the people of his choice. Christ does not serve merely as another of his father's emissaries. He has become the vine, and *the people of God are now the branches*. There is a new relationship obtaining between God and his people. The owner of the vineyard is now the vinegrower. He attends to the vine himself, and the vineyard has become but one vine. All of the Church's members share as branches in the life of that one vine that is Christ. In Christ there has been effected a new relationship between God and his people (Matt. 21: 33-43. 45-46).

All of this constitutes a serious responsibility to tend the vine and to bring forth fruit. Christ told his disciples that he expected that they produce fruit that would last. In the previous situation described in the parable, the produce was not forthcoming. In its stead, the master of the vineyard was conspired against and his representatives were rejected. A judgment came upon the tenants as a result. Let us not be like that! Let us live as true branches of the vine, being open to the care

of the vinegrower who is our heavenly Father, and who wishes us to share in the life of his Son.

A Second Reflection (Genesis 37:3-28)

Trust in God When threats come our way, perhaps loss of possessions, failure in work, bad health, serious sickness or the approach of death, we can be tempted to panic, or rebel, or simply to give up. We can fail in hope and trust because we think there is no one who is looking after us. Consider the patriarch Joseph, the beloved son of Jacob. He was hated by most of his brothers because they were envious of the special love their father had for him. So they violently sold him into the oblivion of slavery in Egypt. Joseph may have thought there was no hope, humanly speaking. But the integrity he displayed in Egypt (as recounted in Genesis) shows that he still trusted in God. In fact, God used his enslavement for far-reaching purposes. He exalted Joseph in Egypt and as a result of this, he was the instrument whereby God preserved Jacob and his family from devastating famine. From Jacob and his family would come the

Messiah. Among many things, the story of Joseph powerfully reminds us that God is our Father and our constant Provider, no matter what happens to us.

Joseph was a type of Christ. Throughout his Passion, Christ abandoned himself to the care of his Father. Let us resolve to abandon ourselves into the Father's care, no matter what might happen to us.



Saturday of the Second Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 145 (144): 8-9 The Lord is kind and full of compassion, slow to anger, abounding in mercy. How good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures.

Collect O God, who grant us by glorious healing remedies while still on earth to be partakers of the things of heaven, guide us, we pray, through this present life and bring us to that light in which you dwell. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Micah 7:14-15.18-20; Psalm 102;
 Luke 15:1-3.11-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law murmured, This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable: There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his

property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the

fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' (Luke 15:1-3.11-32)

God and Sin

The parable that our Lord tells in today's Gospel passage is famous in world literature. The brief story is colourful, symmetrical, simple, complete. It is the perfect brief story containing a moral point. The point relates to the murmuring of the religious leaders who criticized our Lord's easy association with "sinners and tax collectors." Elsewhere, the Gospels record our Lord dining – on invitation – with the Pharisees, and that was acceptable. But *here* he is dining with sinners and tax collectors! Undoubtedly our Lord seemed at peace with this disreputable lot, and exuded happiness at their ease and delight in being in his company. On this occasion the religious leaders do not direct and express their objection to our Lord himself or to his disciples, for perhaps they feared an open debate with him. But their mutterings were noticed by our Lord and he immediately dealt with the challenge. What he was doing, so they deemed, was most unlike how God acts. God utterly shuns sinners. He punishes them and keeps them far from him because of their sinfulness. So the parable is about God and what he is like. He is a Father to us, a wonderful Father, a Father who welcomes sinners back to him, provided they come back with a

recognition of their sins. He is a God rich in mercy. He hates sin and it distresses him, but he yearns for the return to him of the sinner, and at this repentant return he goes to the sinner and embraces him. That is what happens in the parable of the Father who is so prodigal with his love, and that is what we see in Jesus Christ. In the same Gospel of St Luke (ch.19) we read that our Lord was passing through Jericho and Zacchaeus, a leading tax collector, ran ahead to climb a tree to see Jesus as he passed by. Our Lord reached the tree, looked up, called Zacchaeus by name and invited himself to his home to dine. He dined with the leading Pharisees when invited, and he dined with the leading tax collectors – the leading "sinners" – on his own initiative. In the case of Zacchaeus the conversion was remarkable, and we may presume that he became a faithful disciple of our Lord. Our Lord acted as God acts.

While the parable is fundamentally about God as revealed in his Son Jesus Christ, it is also about man. The fundamental issue for man is not food, clothing, education, success, prosperity or failure – however truly important these are. The fundamental issue in life is sin and the

recognition of it. If there is no recognition of personal sin, there will be no return to the Father. If there is no desire to abandon the path of sin – that path pursued by the younger son in the parable – then man will die in his sins. *The wages of sin are death*, St Paul writes in Romans. So the first thing that the parable teaches about man is that the greatest evil is sin, which is separation from God by acts which disobey and offend him. No matter how slight the sin, deliberate sin is the worst thing a man can do. Sin is the principal issue in the life of every man and woman. It was the principal issue at the beginning when God gave to man his command and it was flouted, and it remains from age to age the principal issue for man. We must recognize that we are sinners, and we must do what the younger son did in the parable. We must resolve to turn away from sin and return to the Father. Sin must be recognized and renounced. The motive for this is the revelation and the thought of the love of God. That is what man must do, and it is this that we see happening in today's parable. The sinner – the younger son – recognizes his sin and returns to the Father, but there are those who see little sin in themselves and do not wish well of those who do. The

Pharisees, who criticized our Lord for receiving sinners and dining with them, saw little or no sin in themselves. Nor did they wish well of those who did see sin in themselves. Thus it is that in the picture of man presented to us in the parable, there are two classes of persons. While all have sinned, some recognize this and others do not. Zacchaeus recognized his sinfulness and gloried in the welcome and the friendship of Jesus Christ. We may presume that the sinners and tax collectors who dined with our Lord here also shared in the attitude of Zacchaeus. But we see no such recognition of personal sin in the Pharisees, such as to lead them to the One who takes away the sin of the world.

There are all sorts of things we can do in life and there is no need to list them. One thing we must do is gain a recognition of the fact of sin in ourselves and its odious character. Sin is both evil in itself and it is offensive to the good God. We must recognize its presence in our lives and ask for the grace to turn away from it and go back to God. The Romans of antiquity left a great one-liner for generations to

remember: *Carthage must be destroyed!* The deeper one-liner to be taken up by the whole human race is: *sin must be destroyed.* That is to say, sin must be recognized, fought against and overcome. The converse of this – the other side of the very same coin – is that there must be a return in repentance to God our heavenly Father. By the grace of Christ this can be done! Let us all go to it, then!



Third Sunday of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24): 15-16 My eyes are always on the Lord, for he rescues my feet from the snare. Turn to me and have mercy on me, for I am alone and poor.

Or

Cf. Ez 36: 23-26 When I prove my holiness among you, I will gather you from all the foreign lands; and I will pour clean water upon you and cleanse you from all your impurities, and I will give you a new spirit, says the Lord.

Collect O God, author of every mercy and of all goodness, who in fasting, prayer and almsgiving have shown us a remedy for sin, look graciously on this confession of our lowliness, that we, who are bowed down by our conscience, may always be lifted up by your mercy. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 3:1-8.13-15; Psalm 102;
 1 Corinthians 10:1-.10-12; Luke 13: 1-9

There were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them- do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Then he told this parable: A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig round it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' (Luke 13:1-9)

Suffering and Repentance

There are two events which our Lord comments on in today's Gospel. They may be said to sum up much of the experience of mankind, and much of what mankind must grapple with when it comes to religion. The two events are the massacre of the Galileans "whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices," and the sudden tragedy of the "eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them." They involved an act of murder and a natural disaster. The lives of human beings were suddenly snuffed out because of an act of man or the turn of natural events. This pattern recurs repeatedly all through history and untold loss of life results. Hurricanes, tidal waves, bush fires, plagues and earthquakes suddenly sweep away up to hundreds of thousands of souls, leaving a train of suffering in their wake to countless families and communities. Alternatively, war and merciless cruelty thunders over populations, leaving smoke and fire rising over the dead and their towns and farms, as far as the eye can see. Typically, secular man will see these tragedies as disproving the very existence of a good, wise and all-powerful God. If such a Being is supposed to exist and be present

everywhere, what is he doing? However, this atheism and agnosticism in the face of evil and suffering is not the *common* response in human history. Commonly, the fact of God remains an unquestioned given, whatever be the puzzles of the world. Rather, the tendency is to interpret the harsh events of life as a *judgment*. Just as in civil society man is usually punished proportionately for misdemeanours and crime, so man tends to interpret the *sufferings* and *mishaps* of life as a proportionate *punishment* for his own sins. He is conscious of sin, and he is certain of the existence of the gods, and so he tends to think that his sufferings are an exact reprisal for his sins. The gods are not pleased with him, he thinks, and so they inflict him with the evils he is undergoing. In the revealed religion of the Old Testament, suffering and death appear at the dawn of history due to the sin of man (Genesis 3). Moreover, in the history of the chosen people, God punishes sins (such as his punishment of Moses for his lack of faith, Saul for his disobedience, David for his murder of Uriah, and the northern kingdom and later Jerusalem for their infidelity).

While the wages of sin are suffering and death, this is not to say that the sufferings man endures in life are simply due to *his own* sins, nor is it to say that they are necessarily in *proportion* to his own sins. What, then, is the meaning of the sufferings that we endure? There are many answers to this, and our Lord gives *one* in our Gospel passage today. Our Lord is told of the massacre by Pilate of several in the place of worship. In response to this news he refers also to the tragedy of the collapse of the Tower of Siloam. Our Lord does not say that they were not sinners. Nor does he say that their sins had absolutely nothing to do with their tragedy and suffering. He does not comment on the sins of those who had died, except to say that their sufferings were not an indicator that they were *greater* sinners than others. What he does say is that their sudden and unprovoked death is a reminder to others that they must take heed to their own situation. If they do not repent, the final upshot of *their sins* will be death. That is to say, sin will lead to death. As St Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans, the wages of sin are death, and that it was because of one man's sin that death entered the world and spread to the whole human

race. And so our Lord concludes his comment on the ones who had been massacred by Pilate, *“unless you repent, you too will all perish.”* It is the same with those who were killed by the falling tower – *“do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”* He reinforces his point by providing yet another image, this time drawn from the fig tree that produces no figs. *“A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig round it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down’”* (Luke 13: 1-9). The sufferings of this life ought lead us to repent, be they our own sufferings, or those of others.

In actual fact, elsewhere our Lord shows – especially in his own Person – that suffering can be an essential part of a high mission from

God. Suffering has been made redemptive by our Lord. That is another dimension of its meaning. But it also reminds us of the need to repent. All are invited by Jesus to enter the Kingdom of God. Even the worst of sinners is called to convert from his sins and to accept the boundless mercy of the Father. Already here on earth, the Kingdom belongs to those who accept it with a humble heart. To them the mysteries of the Kingdom are revealed. Let us then be reminded of the final upshot of unrepented sin, and, turning away from sin, let us believe wholeheartedly in Christ and his Gospel.



Monday of the Third Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83): 3 My soul is longing and yearning for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out to the living God.

Collect May your unfailing compassion, O Lord, cleanse and protect your Church, and, since without you she cannot stand secure, may she be always governed by your grace. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 5: 1-15; Psalms 41/42; Luke 4: 24-30

Jesus said, I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his home town. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed- only Naaman the Syrian. All the people

in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. (Luke 4: 24-30)

Sin and the Good

There are currents of philosophical thought which regard objective morality as a phantom, an illusion, a subjective projection. The "good" – meaning that which is morally good– is deemed to be nothing more than the preferable, or the most useful, or the most in accord with aesthetic taste, or whatever. In terms of objective reality, the "good" and the "ought" are reducible to whatever *happens* to be. Whatever *is*, is what "ought" be. Mere facts are all that there are, and any contours of a moral character in these facts are simply one's subjective reactions, preferences, projections, or opinions as to what is useful. Hence there is no objective moral system, absolutely speaking. Now, this view is remarkable because just as the sheer fact of reality and the world is evident, so is "the good" and "the ought" evident. Duty is a fact of life just as much as is the realm of

material things. If any theory does not accept the manifest moral phenomenon of duty then it is difficult to know how to proceed in the discussion. John Henry Newman, in his study of the nature of faith, states that he begins with the fact that we have a conscience. By "conscience" he means the consciousness of duty and moral obligation. This, to him, is evident – which is to say that the objective moral realm is evident, even if it is not clear whether this or that proposed course of action is morally obligatory. But now, granted the manifest fact that there are objective moral obligations, the next striking feature of human life is that moral obligations can be calmly, freely and absolutely rejected. The "good" and the "ought" can easily be avoided, flouted, ignored, greatly weakened and crushed. It is possible for a man to set out on a life-long course of rejecting the "ought" and even destroying it. His mind and heart will become blinded and depraved by his rejection of the "ought," and this will lead him to reject the "ought" the more. The destruction of the human being is set in train most especially by his rejection of what is morally good, and his acceptance of what is morally bad. We might keep healthy by good exercise and a

proper diet, but our fundamental and everlasting health is determined by our response to the "ought." The great issue of life and history is the human response to what is morally good.

We see this encapsulated in our Gospel passage today (Luke 4: 24-30). Our Lord is speaking to his own townspeople. He stands before them, having returned from his developing prophetic ministry in Judea and Galilee. They had heard about it, for the fame of our Lord had gone forth throughout the country. While during his years growing up in Nazareth his true nature and incomparable grandeur would not have been suspected – which shows the strength and completeness of the Incarnation – his relatives and townsmen must have seen a little of the great goodness of his life. They must have understood something of his immense probity, and we see something of this in John the Baptist's response when our Lord presented himself to him for baptism. "It is you who ought be baptizing me," he said to Jesus. Jesus did not deny it, but asked that the baptism proceed for it was fitting in view of God's plan. John the Baptist knew Christ's goodness of life, and, as I have just

said, presumably his townsmen in Nazareth also divined something of it. So there he stood, speaking to them in the Synagogue, the very good man whom they knew so well. All their eyes were upon him. But what happened? When the "ought" was presented to them, they rebelled and attempted to crush it. Our Lord's own Person embodied all of moral grandeur, and all that was morally required. The "ought" was that they accept his Person and his teaching and revelation that he was the promised Messiah. But they refused to do what they "ought" to have done. Our Lord could read their hearts and warned them by pointing to similar instances in the Scriptures. They would be passed by if they did not change. *"I tell you the truth, he continued, no prophet is accepted in his home town. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed- only Naaman the Syrian."*

The people of Nazareth – at least a significant section of them – attempted to kill our Lord. It was an omen of what was to come, and it manifested the mystery of sin. We are able to apprehend clearly that the good ought be done and evil ought be avoided. But we are also able to disregard this fundamental natural law, especially by rejecting specific moral obligations. We disregard and flout it in its particular embodiments. The fullest and most perfect embodiment of the "good" is the Person of Jesus Christ. We can accept him in love and in faith, or we can reject him. A striking instance of the rejection of him occurred not long into his public ministry, when the people of his own town attempted to do away with him. Let us take heed, then, and preserve our hearts for Jesus Christ, resisting any tendency to dally with sin and evil.



Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16): 6, 8 To you I call, for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect May your grace not forsake us, O Lord, we pray, but make us dedicated to your holy service and at all times obtain for us your help. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Daniel 3:25.34-43; Psalm 24; Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children

and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. (Matthew 18:21-35)

Forgive! At this point in history perhaps the most serious issue for peace in the world is the conflict in the Middle East, such as that involving the Palestinians and the Israelis, factions at war in Syria, Iraq and other areas there. The conflict is long, bitter and intractable. There are several fundamental issues, but it would appear that there is also the refusal by each side to forgive. Each may regard it as perfectly reasonable that it refuse to forgive the atrocities committed by the other, but ordinary reflection would suggest that unless there is a breakthrough in the impasse of this refusal, the cauldron will continue unabated. So we are led to think of forgiveness in the life of fallen man. In respect to the conflicts just mentioned, to mention but the Israelis and Palestinians – both sides represent religions which look to Abraham as their common father. Still, they have long been in conflict with one another. The call to forgive stands, but the involvement of religion in the situation raises the question of the prominence that each of these two religions give to forgiveness. How important, how critical, is it to the practitioner of Judaism and Islam that he or she *forgive*? Is forgiveness an imperative, an imperative whatever be the injury, an

imperative for retaining or gaining the favour of God? I am not aware that, in either Islam or in Judaism, it is understood that forgiveness is an absolute imperative no matter what the injury. Nor am I aware that it is an absolute requirement in, say, Hinduism or Buddhism or, say, Zoroastrianism. I do not think it could be maintained that forgiveness is the key to the thought of the great natural philosophers who profess to construct their systems on reason. In general, forgiveness is recognized as a noble quality and quite necessary – if progress in difficult human relations is to be attained. It is a tactic. Society requires that people forgive others – but (we think), to a point. We ought forgive, but only to a point. Beyond that, forgiveness is *unreasonable*. The distinguishing – nay, the astonishing – feature of the Christian religion is that we are commanded by our divine Founder to forgive always and from the heart, no matter what be the injury or the debt. If this is refused, there will be divine sanctions.

The old image of an injury being requited by means of a formal duel would be abhorrent to Jesus Christ. That is not to say that crimes

are to be allowed by society to go un-resisted and unpunished, for such a path would spell the end of law and social concord. But the teaching of Jesus Christ is concerned with what goes on *in the human heart*. As St Paul writes, we must put on *the mind* of Jesus Christ. The heart must forgive any and every injury. In various passages of the New Testament this teaching comes through clearly and insistently. The Lord's Prayer gives special prominence to the forgiveness which we promise when asking God for his forgiveness. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, we pray. Having taught this Prayer, our Lord concludes by warning of the sanctions associated with the failure to practise forgiveness: *Yes, if you do not forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will not forgive you yours*. In our parable today, the command to forgive is absolutely at the forefront, and our Lord concludes with these words: *"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart"* (Matthew 18: 21-35). Now, this forgiveness from the heart can be a most difficult thing to do. It can seem impossible, and because of this it can be quietly shelved, quietly

ignored, and never really presented to one's conscience in its entirety. Because of this we can go along day by day with a certain level of generosity in fulfilling our duties before God, but all the while ignoring the most fundamental ones. Am I forgiving those who have injured me? Am I *trying* to forgive them? Am I asking for the *grace* to do this? What our Lord says elsewhere in a different context, is applicable here. For man, it is impossible, but not for God. For God all things are possible. We ought pray for the grace to remember – in a way the servant of the master failed to remember – the goodness of God in our regard. He has forgiven us, so we ought forgive our neighbour. Let us then steep ourselves in the fundamental fact of life, which is the love and forgiveness of God in our regard. On this basis we shall find the wherewithal to forgive and love others when they trespass seriously against us.

So serious is this challenge in the life of each person that it may even be regarded as the principal challenge and duty of life. In some respects it could be the work of a life, and it could take a lifetime. But,

if at the end of our lives we have from the heart forgiven everyone who has injured or offended us, we shall be in a good condition to depart from this life for our meeting with God our Judge. Let us not leave it to the last minute, then! Let us get down to it this very day, forgiving those who have injured us, and forgiving them from the heart. Let us pray for the grace, and then do it!



Wednesday of the Third Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 119 (118): 133 Let my steps be guided by your promise; may evil never rule me.

Collect Grant, we pray, O Lord, that, schooled through Lenten observance and nourished by your word, through holy restraint we may be devoted to you with all our heart and be ever united in prayer. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 4:5-9; Psalm 147;
Matthew 5:17-19

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called

least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever puts into practice and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17-19)

Act, Do! Prior to his election as Pope, John Paul II's primary academic discipline was philosophy, although he had also published in theology and literature (i.e., drama and poetry). Within philosophy he worked within a school of thought that combined Thomism and modern phenomenology, as developed in a special way at the University of Lublin, Poland, where he taught prior to his becoming Archbishop of Crakow. His principal philosophical work, translated into English from the original Polish, was *The Acting Person*. It stressed the paramount importance of the act, as opposed to, say, mere thought. It is not merely man's thoughts but his acts that define him and set his course. Indeed, it is his action that manifests his real thought and it is his action that naturally takes him beyond himself in a form of self-transcendence. Man finds himself to be not just a self that thinks but a self that acts in and on the world. One philosophical advantage of

this approach is that if the human act rather than mere human thought is the starting point of one's account of man, then while man's thought is included in his action, the Cartesian isolation of the thinking self from the world is avoided. Modifying Descartes' famous first principle that brought so many problems to the philosophy of knowledge, we may say, "I act, therefore I am" – rather than Descartes' "I think, therefore I am." Be all this as it may, my point in dwelling upon a philosophy that lays primary stress on human action is that it surely prepares us for our Lord's own stress on action. It is not just what we think that makes all the difference – although what we (choose to) think does matter a great deal. But it is what we do about it that will matter so much more. We think of our Lord himself who came not as, say, another Socrates – although, as we remember, his disciples came to see that he *knew* all things. Socrates the thinker could not, as we might say, hold a candle to him. But, more than anything he came not merely as a master of thought, but as one who did the greatest of works, and at immense cost to himself. The Son of God came to *act*, to take away the sin of the

world. He came, he says in today's Gospel (Matthew 5: 17-19), to *fulfil* the Law and the Prophets.

And so it is that it is not enough to know and think of the commandments of God. Christ counts as great the man who obeys them and teaches others to obey them. It is action, deeds, obedience, that Christ expects. He wants us to conform our lives to what we know to be right, and this we do not just by thinking about what is right, but by acting on what is right. Cardinal Newman once wrote that the essence of religion lies in authority and obedience. He was countering the liberal and relativistic view of religion which made one's private judgment and free opinion the fundamental principle. Nevertheless, his statement has a wider relevance. A religion of God's authority and man's obedience is one that places the stress on what we *do* rather than just what we think. *"Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever puts into practice and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven"*

(Matthew 5:17-19). This stress on active obedience involving, for instance, a profoundly moral life, is a most notable characteristic of revealed religion. The prophets inveighed against a religion of sacrifices and holocausts while neglecting and indeed violating justice and mercy – and our Lord criticized the scribes and the Pharisees for a similar defect in their religion. He said to his disciples that it is not those who say to me, Lord! Lord! who will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. He contrasted the foolish man with the sensible man. The foolish man, the one who hears the word but fails to do it, has built his house on sand. The sensible man, the one who hears and obeys the will of God, has built his house on rock. He stands, whatever be the rains and the floods. His is a religion that endures because what counts in his life is that he *does* what God wants of him and not just – let us say – knows it. He does not neglect the all-important business of action. Every day he rises from his rest in order to act, to do the work, to fulfil the duty that God is asking of him. The saint is the person who *does* what God expects of him. He does not just know it and think about it.

Of course, we must understand "action" broadly, which is to say in a sense that includes all of man's acting. The acting person is the person whose action embraces praying, recreating, and the myriad forms of serving, but who, in all his acts, is resolved to do whatever is right even at the cost of his life. That is why Jesus Christ is the Man *par excellence*. He acted, and in his acts he did what pleased the Father. Cardinal Newman understood the conscience to be the most distinctive faculty of man's mind, and what does the conscience do? The conscience reveals what a person is called to *do*. It imposes a moral obligation on him to *act* in a certain way. In God's plan, the acting person strives to know the will of God and puts it into practice. If we do this, we flourish as human beings and are on the path to glory.



Thursday of the Third Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon I am the salvation of the people, says the Lord. Should they cry to me in any distress, I will hear them, and I will be their Lord for ever.

Collect We implore your majesty most humbly, O Lord, that, as the feast of our salvation draws ever closer, so we may press forward all the more eagerly towards the worthy celebration of the Paschal Mystery. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 7: 23-28; Psalm 94; Luke 11: 14-23

Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed. But some of them said, By Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons. Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: Any kingdom divided against

itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub. Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils. He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters. (Luke 11:14-23)

Demons Imagine that you are among a small party of astronauts who have docked in at the space station, on the way to a moon landing. You look out at planet earth and see the marvel of its contours and composition. You advert to the fact that it is just a possibility that no other planet in all of the vast universe is so constructed as to support the extraordinary range of life that teems on planet earth. Earth abounds

with innumerable forms of life on land, in the sea and in the air. Planet earth is astonishingly varied, and all is supported by an extraordinary set of circumstances that continue age after age. These circumstances themselves depend directly or indirectly on the rest of the universe. One great mishap could convulse everything. Imagine the effect of three vast meteors colliding with the earth! Your eyes now roam from the earth to the moon, and then on to Mars and the other planets in your galaxy, and then on to other galaxies. Your imagination attempts to envisage the scarcely calculated limits of the universe, and the marvel of the one only God strikes your mind yet again. All this sea of visible things is sustained by, we may say, the touch of his finger. Were that touch to be withdrawn, all would be reduced instantly to nought. Though the universe is commonly thought to be simply “there” — a vast object of unending research that never seems to raise the mind to a Beyond — it is not simply “there.” It is the work of the great God and he continues in his mercy to do this work of creation. By doing this he sustains the apple of his eye, *man* — man who is made in *his* image and likeness. But even the religious person whose faith is

alive and active, as he looks out on the universe, can forget an even more vast and extraordinary world. I am referring to the *unseen* world, the world of God, and the souls and spirits both good and bad, created by him. There is a world which no man can see. It consists of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It also consists of the souls of all those who have died, and how many millions must they be — a population of individuals numerous times that of present planet earth. It also consists of the angels and the demons. This entire unseen realm is sustained by God.

Of course, we have no idea of the number of spirits there are — and by “spirits” I refer to those of the angelic world, the world of angels and demons. Our Lord, the Son of the living God, often refers to them both. St Thomas Aquinas points out that each angelic being is its own distinct species. It would be regarded as a natural catastrophe if it were discovered that an entire species of plant, bird, insect, or animal were down to one individual in that species. Numerous species are now extinct. Well, each angelic spirit is its own distinct species, and being

spiritual, has an immortal nature. How spectacular must be the variety of the angelic world, then! An angel, sustained by the hand of God, is by nature immortal. The numbers of angels too would be breathtaking. Our Lord said in the Garden of Gethsemane, that at his word the Father would send twelve legions of angels to defend him. Again, how many guardian angels must there be! In our Gospel today (Luke 11:14-23) our Lord refers to the kingdom of Satan: “If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?” our Lord asks his accusers. So there is a kingdom of demons. He implies that there are two kingdoms in the unseen world, each standing one against the other. There is the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, and our Lord by his death broke the power of the kingdom of Satan. The point I am making is that however enthralled we might be with the world which is our home, our responsibility and our challenge, let us, children of a very secular age, never forget the invisible, *supernatural* world. We tend to regard the demonic either as a joke, or as a terrible force that is simply beyond us. It is no joke — our Lord did not joke about Satan as if he were just a mischievous fairy. He is the master

demon of the underworld, and the images of the evil forces in Tolkein's Lord of the Rings may help us envisage his world. He is no joke, but nor is his strength beyond our resources — provided we take our stand with Christ. The Gospels portray Christ effortlessly putting to flight the demons in possession of people. The case of their master-stroke, Christ's Passion and Death, was all part of the plan of God. By submitting to his apparent defeat, Christ won the victory. It was all according to the divine plan.

Bearing on the world that we see is another world, unseen, supernatural. It is populated by our friends and our enemies. Our friends are the stronger far, and the Friend par excellence is the Lord God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Son of God became man to put to flight the evil kingdom, and the victory is already won. In the life of Saint Thomas More, the lord chancellor of England under Henry VIII, there came a great moment. He declared at that moment that "the field is won." He had conquered his fears, and he went on to martyrdom. In Christ, the field is won. Satan has been

vanquished. His kingdom will not stand. Let us take our stand with Jesus Christ, then!



Friday of the Third Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 86 (85): 8, 10 Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord, for you are great and do marvellous deeds; you alone are God.

Collect Pour your grace into our hearts, we pray, O Lord, that we may be constantly drawn away from unruly desires and obey by your own gift the heavenly teaching you give us. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Prayer over the Offerings Look with favour, we pray, Lord, on the offerings we dedicate, that they may be pleasing in your sight and always be salutary for us. Through Christ our Lord.

Scripture today: Hosea 14: 2-10; Psalm 80; Mark 12: 28-34

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, Of all the commandments, which is the most important? The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these. Well said, teacher, the man replied. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, You are not far from the kingdom of God. And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. (Mark 12: 28-34)

We Have a Dream! One of the distinguishing first principles of modern Western culture – in theory if not in practice – is the place of individual human rights. The recognition of human rights is deemed to

be fundamental in a civilized society, according to the Western vision of things. Of course, there are certain rampant violations of human rights in Western countries (such as the rights of the unborn), which show that the deeper matter of a *true understanding* of man and his destiny is more properly at stake. However, there is no doubt that the rights of each person is a defining element in the Western account of man and society. One of the most famous speeches of the twentieth century was precisely a call based on what all in theory accept: human rights. I am thinking of the speech given by Dr Martin Luther King, the great "human rights" activist on behalf of the American Negro. His assassination is universally attributed to the resistance by some to his powerful demand for the full recognition of the human rights of the individual Negro. He had a dream: "I have a dream!" he rhetorically began in sentence after sentence. "I have a dream!" was the refrain of his speech, and now, every time a politician or leader uses these words, it is clear that he wishes all his hearers to associate him with the spirit of Martin Luther King. I have a dream! But ah! Another said this from the mists of eternity, and it was the archetype of all noble dreams. Any

dream that Martin Luther King had was but a pale reflection of the dream that filled the heart of God from before the foundation of the world. I have a dream – a wonderful cry, indeed! But if there is a God – and of course there is a God – then does he have a dream, or does he exist as might a human being with no dreams at all? Ah yes! God has a dream. From the heart of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, there has come a glorious song, a heavenly symphony, a hymn that has burst on the scene of history. That hymn is, "We have a dream!" What is the dream that has filled the Holy Trinity from eternity? It is man's salvation.

In our Gospel today (Mark 12:28-34) we are told that one of the lawyers came and heard the debate between our Lord and his critics. He was full of admiration for our Lord in his answers, and was led to pose the question of questions about the Law, with its numerous commands and prescriptions. He asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Without any hesitation Christ gave the answer: "*The most important one, answered Jesus, is*

this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: *'Love your neighbour as yourself.'* There is no commandment greater than these.” The lawyer could not help but praise our Lord, and proceeded to show that he understood. *"Well said, teacher, the man replied. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."* That is the divine command, and it is the divine dream. It ought be our fundamental dream, the absolute first principle of everything else, including the modern and most commendable dream of the recognition of the human rights of every person. The fundamental dream should be holiness of life and the overcoming of sin. If this is not the basic dream, the hope that is constantly ahead of us, then all other dreams will fall short of their goals. Sin is the source of the corruption and failure of man and society, as well as his eternal damnation. Sin must be conquered!

Personal goodness and holiness of life must be gained! That is the best and truest of all human dreams, and it has been the dream of God for man from all eternity. It was his original gift to man whom he made in his image and likeness, but it was a gift that man squandered and threw away like the prodigal son of our Lord's parable about the loving and indulgent father. So God's dream has continued, it led to the Incarnation, the Atonement, the sending of the Spirit, and the Church.

"We have a dream!" This is the cry of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. With the Incarnation, with God the Son becoming man, the grand dream was implemented. The dream is that each of us will resist and overcome sin by the grace won for us at Calvary. We will thus gain such holiness of life that we will be able to firstly, love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and then to love our neighbour as ourselves. Let us all, day after day, sing this divine melody, "I have a dream," the dream being our redemption and sanctification – and that of all our brothers and sisters.

Saturday of the Third Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 103 (102):2-3 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and never forget all his benefits; it is he who forgives all your sins.

Collect Rejoicing in this annual celebration of our Lenten observance, we pray, O Lord, that, with our hearts set on the paschal mysteries, we may be gladdened by their full effects. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 6: 1-6; Psalm50; Luke 18: 9-14

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men- robbers, evildoers, adulterers- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven,

but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke: 18: 9-14)

Authentic Religion

There are some fundamental human activities which all men and women find themselves engaged in. Man must work in order to eat and to pursue his interests. Of course, he finds himself reflecting on things, and making choices – some of which are momentous and have far-reaching consequences. So the list could go on. Man also finds himself being religious, or tending to be religious, or taking to religion when it is presented to him as he grows. He is drawn into the religious life of his family and his community. As a result of his power of reflection and choice he may abandon the religion of his upbringing and forego religion or adopt another. I think we could say that, looking at the matter anthropologically and sociologically, religion is one of the most common of human activities. So pervasive is it in traditional societies that, as has often been observed when setting

man in the context of other living and conscious beings, man could be described as a religious being. Yes, of course he works in order to eat and do other things. Of course he reflects and chooses. But equally notable is the abundant manifestations of his religious life. But what is the essential activity of religion? What is it to be religious, authentically religious, and indeed profoundly religious? Of course, all understand that the religious person is the one who acknowledges God as the living Master of his life, however God may be conceived and imagined. A person who through ignorance, neglect or deliberate choice did not recognize God (or the gods) in this way, would never be described as religious, except in some analogous sense. That having been granted, could we make this more explicit and identify an inner attitude, informing one's recognition of God, which marks the authentically religious person? Putting it slightly differently, is there something the religious person, the one who recognizes God as Master, should especially attempt to develop in his attitude before God? In our Lord's day (as in every day) there were persons who were

professionally religious and who led the people in their religion. But many of them were not especially religious at all.

It is very fortunate that our Lord's teaching was commonly given in images rather than in, as with Aristotle, abstract discourse. Our Lord's teaching was meant for the world – including all future Aristotles – and so he spoke in the pictorial language of mankind. In our Gospel today (Luke: 18: 9-14) our Lord tells his well-known parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, and he turns firstly to the Pharisee. The Pharisee was the religious person – in the view of society. Our Lord did not discount the role of the scribes and the Pharisees, and on one occasion he directed that his hearers do what they say while avoiding their example. They occupied the chair of Moses. They were legitimate religious teachers and they sustained to a greater or lesser extent the religious life of the nation. So, in his parable our Lord describes the Pharisee – and he is devastating in his description of the inner character of the religion of many of them. The prayer of the Pharisee went thus: *"God, I thank you that I am not like other*

men- robbers, evildoers, adulterers- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." Essentially, he exalted himself. The properly religious person exalts *God*, but the Pharisee in the parable exalted himself, before God and before others. So there we have from the lips of our Lord himself one thing which the religious person absolutely must not do. He must avoid self-exaltation like the plague. This self-exaltation can even be very secret, seen by God himself. By contrast, the Tax Collector stood far back, perhaps in the shadows of the Temple where he would scarcely be seen. He had nothing to show before the gaze of men. But, most especially, he had nothing to show before the gaze of God, and he knew it. "*He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*" Now, Cardinal John Henry Newman, a leading religious mind of the nineteenth century, claimed that this expressed the essence of authentic religion. The plain and manifest fact is that we are sinners, and he, Newman, maintained that even natural, fallen man knows or should know this. We are sinners and our most authentic act

in religion is to acknowledge our sinfulness before God and to ask his forgiveness.

Our Lord sums up the effect of each prayer, and states that the Pharisee was left separated from God and still in sin, whereas the sinful Tax Collector was left reconciled with God. "I tell you that this man," our Lord concludes, "rather than the other, went home justified before God." What we must do, whether we are called to occupy a lowly and hidden place in the world or a prominent place that draws the esteem of others, is to be like the Tax Collector in our inner religion. Our heart must be steeped in *humility and contrition before God*. This is what it means to be authentically religious. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."



Fourth Sunday of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 66: 10-11 Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast.

Collect O God, who through your Word reconcile the human race to yourself in a wonderful way, grant, we pray, that with prompt devotion and eager faith the Christian people may hasten toward the solemn celebrations to come. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Joshua 5: 9.10-11; Psalm 33;
2 Corinthians 5: 17-21; Luke 15:1-3.11-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law murmured, This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable: There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to

his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on

him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I have been serving you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' (Luke 15:1-3.11-32)

Conversion and Repentance

It is clear from the context of this long passage that our Lord's principal point is that God is very different from what the Pharisees and teachers of the Law imagined him to be. They murmured at our Lord welcoming sinners and eating with them. Jesus, they insinuated, was unlike the all-holy God who hates sin. God, they thought, does not allow sinners to draw near to him, and he condemns and punishes sinners. So our Lord proceeds to explain himself and his actions by means of a parable. The principal figure of the parable is the indulgent and loving father who warmly welcomes his wayward son back to the family home. God does not shun the sinner – provided the sinner acknowledges his sin and returns to him repentant. Now, while our Lord provides us with a remarkable surprise as to the nature of the all-holy God – that he is love and compassion – his parable also tells us about *man*. While it tells us about God our Father, it also divides his children into two types. There is the son who is full of the awareness that he has sinned against heaven and against his loving father. There is also the older son who can only think of the fact that "All these years I have been serving you and never disobeyed

your orders.” The younger son has a profound sense of his sin. Because of the pain his sins have brought upon himself he is repentant, even if his repentance is not especially noble-minded. He has not been led back by the thought of the offence to his father that his life has been, but by the experience of suffering it brought upon himself. So his life has been wayward and his repentance less than perfect. How like the sinners and tax collectors they were, who gathered about our Lord! Despite their sins they experienced what the younger son in the parable experienced, a loving welcome from Jesus Christ who, as St Paul writes, is the image of the unseen God. By contrast, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were like the older son who could only think of his faithful service. He begrudged the special welcome the younger son was receiving, and was angry with his forgiving father.

So we are reminded by our Lord's parable not only of the boundless love of God for man despite his sin, but of the critical importance of there being *a sense of sin in every man and*

woman. According to the teaching of the Church, only two human beings have been absolutely free of sin in every sense. Firstly of course, Jesus Christ was entirely free of sin because, though having assumed a human nature, he is divine in his Person. He could never sin, even though as man he was open to temptations coming from without, and the Gospels record some of the temptations Satan presented to him. The other human being who, the Church teaches, was sinless, was the Virgin Mary his mother. Creature of God that she was, by the power of the Holy Spirit she was conceived free of sin, and remained sinless throughout her life. This she did by the power of God's grace and her cooperation with that grace. All men, St Paul writes, are under the power of sin due to the original Fall, and were it not for the special grace of God, the all-holy Virgin Mary would have been too. But due to the merits of her divine Son, she was preserved from the inherited condition of sin. All this is to say that the response of the older son in the parable was utterly inappropriate, considered as a type of man's response to God. We cannot say to God that we have been "all these years serving you" and having "never disobeyed your orders." We are

sinners all, even if to a greater or lesser extent. We should place ourselves in the camp of the younger son who returned repentant to the embrace of his loving father. What must distinguish our lives is repentance from sin and confidence in the love of God our Father. Our Lord holds up for our contemplation the loving mercy of God and the repentance of the younger son who trusted in his father. The older son, by his self-righteous attitude and hostility to both his younger brother and to his loving father, refused to come inside to join in the celebrations. How like the Pharisees complaining about our Lord! Christ's call to conversion must continue to resound in our lives. Conversion is a continuing and life-long obligation for each of us and for the whole Church.

Our Lord's essential point in the parable of this Sunday is that God is boundlessly merciful to the sinner who returns to him in repentance. The one who does not thus return, excludes himself from the friendship of God. The grace of God is our hope, and it enables us to respond to the merciful love of God by sorrow for sin and a firm

purpose of amendment. We express this in acts of contrition and in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The same grace of God enables us to continue to trust in God, and to live a life of penance in prayer, fasting and almsgiving. There are two recurring times when the Church invites us to practise this penance in a special way: Lent and each Friday. Let us then aim at true conversion, and be duly warned against the spirit of the older son in today's parable.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1427-1449
(Conversion and repentance)

A Second Reflection: (Luke 15: 1-3.11-32)

Sin Today's Gospel passage is famous in world literature. In it our Lord tells the story of the prodigal son, a sinner who contritely admits what he has done: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.' But let us remember why our Lord told the parable. We read that the tax collectors and the sinners were all seeking the company of Jesus to hear what he had to say, and the Pharisees and the scribes

complained. 'This man' they said 'welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So in response to this objection that what he was doing was ungodly, our Lord told the parable explaining why he, sinless as he was, welcomed sinners and ate with them. The prodigal son welcomed by the father is the tax collector and the sinner. The older brother who complains at his father's behaviour is the scribe and the Pharisee complaining at our Lord's behaviour. But more than anything, the father in the parable is the image which Christ gives to us of God. It describes what God is like if we come to him, acknowledging that we are sinners. Like the father of the prodigal son, God our Father is extravagantly forgiving, provided we return to him with contrition. A principal purpose of Lent is to realize the love of God and to turn back to him seeking his forgiveness, especially in the Sacrament of Penance. In the second reading St Paul says, *In Christ's name we appeal to you, be reconciled to God.* God is all-forgiving. During Lent let us strive to understand what God is like, and that we are sinners in profound need of his love.

One of the most serious and yet common mistakes we can make in life is to think that little sins, as they are called, do not matter much. The moment we fall into any sin through weakness – and here I am referring especially to venial sin – we should make an act of contrition, of sorrow for sin, and ask God's forgiveness. Our ambition ought to be to avoid deliberate *venial* sin, precisely and above all because it is an offence against God. If we take venial sin lightly we shall not only never reach holiness. Deliberate and unrepented venial sin is also the path that leads to mortal sin. Of course, if the sin is mortal, whether it be a sin of thought or word or deed, we must endeavour to make an act of perfect contrition, that is to say, an act of sorrow inspired primarily by the thought that I have seriously offended the good God. Then we ought approach the Sacrament of Penance as soon as possible, for most concentrated and effective way of receiving God's pardon, whether it be for mortal or venial sin, is through the Sacrament of Penance. The Church recommends regular and frequent confession of venial sins. When it comes to any mortal sin, we are absolutely bound to seek God's forgiveness for that sin in the Sacrament of

Penance, and we should do so as quickly as possible. We certainly must do so before receiving Holy Communion. A great benefit of being a Catholic is that by means of Confession we can always regain the state of grace through this sacrament, and grow in it. We are bound by Church law to confess any grave sins, at least once a year in order to receive Holy Communion during the Easter season.

Our Lord gave us the Sacrament of Penance after his resurrection, when he said to his apostles, "Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive they are forgiven them." St John Chrysostom reminds us that this authority to forgive is not even given to archangels, nor is it given to our Lady herself. Yet it is given to every priest, and this is done for our benefit, to keep us in the state of grace. So let's use it.

A Third Reflection: (Luke 15: 1-3.11-32)

Love and Sin By the fourth Sunday of Lent we are well and truly into the Lenten Season, the season of repentance from sin. We are

invited by Christ and the Church to be conscious of sin and to turn from it back to our loving Father. In our Lord's parable, the Prodigal Son came to realise that he was a sinner. "I have sinned," he said to his loving father, "against God and against you." He offers no excuses. He knew he had sinned and he understood what sin had led to. He confessed his sin and he was received back into his father's friendship. Now, it is important to understand the purpose of this story. The parable is above all about God our Father, and about Jesus who is the image of the Father. He who sees me sees the Father, he said at the Last Supper. The Pharisees despised sinners, but Jesus sought *them* out and showed them love and offered *them* his company. In response, sinners sought *him* out. The parable is about God awaiting the return of the sinner whom he greatly loves, and whom he is always ready to forgive, if the sinner is willing to renounce his sins and return to him. So, as we read the parable we ought think first of God our loving Father, and of Jesus who reveals him. God *loves* sinners. All through the parable the father of the prodigal son is portrayed as *lovingly indulgent*. The younger of the two sons said to his father,

"Father, let me have the share of property that falls to me". The father did not object, rather he simply divided his living between them. If anything, the father was excessively indulgent. God will be our Judge, but that does not take away from the fact that he is indulgent with us, especially while we have the chance in this life of *repenting*. The younger son went off and squandered his property in loose living. Then in the depths of distress and depression he returned home seeking work in his father's house. He realised that his father loved him, and so he felt sufficiently confident to return to ask for employment. But what happened? The story tells us that 'while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.' And so they began to celebrate.

This is the image we should have of God receiving any soul who turns away from sin and comes back to friendship with him. Just before our Lord tells this particular parable, he says that there will be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. St John in one of his letters tells us

that God is love. One of the things we ought be working on during Lent is a *correct image of God*, and the picture of the indulgent father in today's parable can help us. But the parable also tells us about *sin*: it ruined the younger son. Sin is not only a profound offence against God and his most holy nature. It is also the great destroyer of creation and of man. God, while loving us with a boundless love, hates sin. For this reason he sent his son, to take away the sin of the world. So while we think of God's love for us, we should also think of what *sin does to us* and of how *hateful it is to God*. Again, the parable of our Gospel text helps us appreciate sin and its destructive power. The younger son squandered all his property in loose living, and when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country and he began to be in want. So he ended up serving the swine, and the swine were better off than he, in terms of food. No one gave him anything to eat. That is what he had come to. Let that be an image of the wages of sin, which St Paul tells us is death. Let us think of sin with the help of this famous parable, and let us endeavour to recover a sense of sin, and of how it is the greatest evil in the world. God hates sin and wants to see it entirely

overcome and eliminated, precisely because he loves us. The younger son experienced the dregs of suffering because of his sins, and Christ stepped into the place of the younger son and bore on his shoulders the consequences of the sin of all mankind. He expiated for the sin of the world. If we wish to gain a true idea of the hatefulness of sin and of its consequences for mankind, look on our Lord hanging on the cross. It was sin, our sins, the sins of each person, that put him there.

It is imperative that we recognise the presence and nature of sin in our lives. God hates sin which is the gravest affront to him. But he loves us, who commit the sin that he hates. Every time we commit a sin – even a venial sin but most of all if it is a mortal sin – we must make a sincere act of contrition, one that is as perfect an expression of love for God as we can. We should go to Confession regularly and frequently, and each time we go we should make it as good a Confession as possible. We should examine our consciences daily. At the beginning of every Mass we confess our sinfulness, thinking of the times we have sinned. In each of these ways, let us make Lent a time when we recover

a sense of sin and renounce it profoundly – in view of the love of our heavenly Father.



Monday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30): 7-8 As for me, I trust in the Lord. Let me be glad and rejoice in your mercy, for you have seen my affliction.

Collect O God, who renew the world through mysteries beyond all telling, grant, we pray, that your Church may be guided by your eternal design and not be deprived of your help in this present age. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 65:17-21; Psalm 29; John 4:43-54

After the two days Jesus left for Galilee. (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honour in his own country.) When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, for they also had been there. Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay

sick at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death. Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, Jesus told him, you will never believe. The royal official said, Sir, come down before my child dies. Jesus replied, You may go. Your son will live. The man took Jesus at his word and departed. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. When he enquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, The fever left him yesterday at the seventh hour. Then the father realised that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, Your son will live. So he and all his household believed. This was the second miraculous sign that Jesus performed, having come from Judea to Galilee. (John 4: 43-54)

God, Saviour of All. There is a detail in our Gospel passage today which prompts thoughts about the saving plan of God for the whole world. I refer to the departure of our Lord from Samaria and his return to Galilee. John, the author of the account, mentions that the event he is

about to describe, occurred in "*Cana of Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine.*" This mention by John of specific locations and what happened twice at this particular location reminds us of the historical and geographical character of revealed religion. Revealed religion is an historical religion rooted in facts that, of course, occurred in precise places. God had drawn very near to man in precise locations which are with us today. In Jesus Christ he had personally come to dwell among a particular people as one of them, in a particular part of the world at a particular time. Places are specifically mentioned and the number of occurrences are specified. Cana is with us today, and it has a beautiful little church to commemorate our Lord's visit and his two miracles there. Some archaeological work done there can be viewed. But let us expand our vision a little, beyond the scene of our Gospel. The passage mentions that "a royal official" – a "nobleman" as Knox chooses to translate the Greek – approached our Lord with his request for a healing of his son at Capernaum. Was the royal official a Hebrew, an adherent of the Jewish religion? We may presume so, but it may not have been the case. In any event, those to whom he was

attached in his work may not have been. We are reminded by this event of the centurion who asked our Lord to come and heal his servant. The centurion had faith that evoked the high praise of Christ. Presumably the centurion was *not* an adherent of the religion of the Hebrews, even though he was friendly to it. He had built the synagogue, we read. Our Lord's personal mission was to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, but he constantly bore in mind the pagan world, for it was all around him. He had grown up in a village that was very near the cosmopolitan city of Zephoris, and had perhaps regularly worked there with Joseph on all the construction continually going on.

Jesus our Lord visited Cana and worked two spectacular miracles there. God was present in person there. But let us now try to imagine the saving work of God among the nations. God was not neglecting his children, the vast majority of whom were beyond the confines of his chosen people. In this respect, let us remember a detail from the infancy narratives of the Gospel of St Matthew. The Magi from the east – presumably Zoroastrians – received the guidance of a

star. God was intervening in a circle of professional adherents of that venerable natural religion to set them on the path to Christ. The path he drew them along led directly to Christ, but the notable thing here is that he was granting them a form of revelation prior to their journey to Christ. We may surely presume that God was, in diverse ways, attempting to draw the peoples along paths that were not unrelated to that which leads to Jesus Christ, the one and only Redeemer of the world. Some of the early Fathers of the Church spoke of the "seeds of the Word" in the philosophies and religions of the world. Cardinal Newman spoke often of a universal revelation. This universal revelation, while in no way serving as a substitute for the Revelation that is Christ who is the only way to the Father, drew the peoples closer to the Father of all and prepared them for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In this extended sense we may accept the terminology of various religions which speak of their founders as "prophets." To an extent, they may have been directly assisted by God in their perception of certain great truths that subsequently guided countless souls after them in the pursuit of the good life. The fact that these great truths – say, of one God, and

of his holy character – were mixed up with many untruths that led subsequently to certain evils, need not gainsay a form of revelation by God. Newman allowed the same point to be made of the work of certain great philosophers. Indeed, the point may be even more applicable to those great philosophers, for Augustine understood Christianity to be the successor of the best of philosophy rather than of the myths of religion.

As we think of Christ visiting Cana of Galilee for the second time and working yet another miracle there, let us also think of God's action across the mighty span of mankind. His Gift of gifts that absolutely opened the gates of heaven was Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son. By entering into communion with Jesus Christ and living according to the demands of that communion, we shall be saved. But God is and has always been reaching out to all of his scattered children of every age and place. He is constantly endeavouring to lead them to him and along the path of good and towards the Person of the Saviour. How good the great God is!

Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 55: 1 All who are thirsty, come to the waters, says the Lord. Though you have no money, come and drink with joy.

Collect May the venerable exercises of holy devotion shape the hearts of your faithful, O Lord, to welcome worthily the Paschal Mystery and proclaim the praises of your salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 47:1-9.12; Psalm 45; John 5:1-16

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie- the blind, the lame, the paralysed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that

he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, Do you want to get well? Sir, the invalid replied, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me. Then Jesus said to him, Get up! Pick up your mat and walk. At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat. But he replied, The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.' So they asked him, Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk? The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. (John 5:1-16)

Jesus Christ One gets the impression that, on the occasion of this miracle of our Gospel passage today, our Lord was in Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews in a somewhat private capacity, without publicity. There is no mention of crowds thronging around him, no mention of his publicly teaching in the Temple, although he may have had some of his disciples with him – such as John who reports the incident. Our Lord may have been visiting for the Feast in this incognito manner to avoid the mounting hostility of the religious leaders, while being able to visit the House of his beloved Father in heaven. So let us observe him quietly mingling with the crowd, his dress similar to the rest, with a cloth headpiece protective against the weather hanging down and perhaps serving partially to hide his features. Let us imagine that he is accompanied by John, perhaps Simon Peter, James and some others. Gaze on this Man of the ages! There he stands, there he moves forward, filled with love and peace, the Light of the world! He sees the truth, and he is the Truth. He is intent on entering the House of his dear Father, his *Abba*. My Father! he whispers to himself. My dear Father! How I long to see you glorified!

Father, *Abba*, dear Father, is the refrain that sings in his heart. This Man has come from the Father himself. His Person was with the Father from age to age. From all eternity the two had been together, united in a third Person, the one who leads him now – the Spirit! The Spirit fills his heart and prompts his powerful and loving prayer that unceasingly rises to the highest heavens and captivates the Father of all, the Origin of origins. There he is, moving ahead. Oh, how marvellous is this Man we watch! We follow him with John and the others. We see his figure, calm, powerful, so utterly good, so very beautiful in his entire being. He is the heart and the head of the whole world, the entire universe. He is the King, the Lord, the One long promised. Is it not a staggering and wondrous thought that this Man who now stops and gazes on an invalid is the very Son of God? We behold in him no mere magnificent prophet, no singular and even unique religious teacher and leader. We are gazing on the living God.

He stops. Perhaps it is a disciple who mentions to him this particular invalid. This incapacitated man has lain there a long time –

his presence at the Bethesda pool began before Jesus was born. He had been there at the pool during those years when the adolescent Jesus accompanied his parents to Jerusalem for the annual Feast. Ah! Think of the adolescent Jesus! What a boy he was! The boy who was God made man! So great in nature and grace, growing in his wondrous humanity, preparing for the titanic work ahead in which he would take away the sin of the world, bring the Spirit to all who asked for it, and found his Church whereby he, the Saviour, would reach the ends of the earth and every person. A titanic work indeed, and here he is now, the Man. Pilate would say to the enemies of Christ, Behold the Man! Let us continue to behold him as he stops now and speaks to the invalid. *"He asked him, Do you want to get well? Sir, the invalid replied, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me. Then Jesus said to him, Get up! Pick up your mat and walk. At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked"* (John 5: 1-16). It seems that that was all that happened, and Jesus moved on, mingling unknown amid the crowd, on his way to the Temple. The

man who had been healed had no idea who it was who had healed him, so effective was our Lord's obscurity during these moments. Our Lord stopped, healed, moved on. Now, let us remember that though our Lord is not visible, he is very much *with us*. Moreover, he sees all our difficulties. Why did he not heal this paralytic long before? We do not know. Thirty-eight years! But the moment finally came – and someone mentioned the invalid. Let us never give up on Jesus Christ for all our needs, and for the needs of others! The same Man said, ask and you will receive, seek and you will find. The one who asks always receives. Let us keep in his presence then, and never forget who it is to whom we are praying!

Let us never take Jesus Christ for granted, in effect forgetting who he is. He is the Man of all mankind, the unique Person of human history. He is truly man, man in every way except that he had no sin, no tendency to sin, no moral fault of any kind because he was literally and truly God. Man though he is, in the first instance he is God, for he is one of the three divine Persons. He took to himself a human nature,

and in his humanity suffered and died for us, taking away the sin of the world. Let us love and follow him then! There is no one like him.



Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 69 (68): 14

I pray to you, O Lord, for a time of your favour. In your great mercy, answer me, O God, with your salvation that never fails.

Collect O God, who reward the merits of the just and offer pardon to sinners who do penance, have mercy, we pray, on those who call upon you, that the admission of our guilt may serve to obtain your pardon for our sins. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today:: Isaiah 49:8-15; Psalm 144; John 5:17-30

Jesus said to them, My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working. For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. Jesus gave them this answer: I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him. I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so

he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out- those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me. (John 5: 17-30)

Jesus It is of great spiritual assistance to the Christian to become immersed in the Old Testament, and this for two obvious reasons. Firstly, if in his reading he keeps the figure of Jesus Christ constantly before him, the Old Testament will be a powerful prefiguring of the One who is the love of his heart. One thinks of the Seed of the Woman who will crush the Serpent's head – at the beginning of Genesis. One thinks of the One to whom the sceptre will be given – at the end of the same book. One thinks of the Prophet foretold by Moses – in Deuteronomy; or the heavenly Son of Man – in the book of Daniel; or again the Suffering Servant who bears the sins of the many – in

Deutero-Isaiah. The figures of human goodness therein portrayed, the inspired profiles and predictions of the One who was coming, all these support, nourish and confirm one's acceptance of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the divine promises. God had promised to Abraham that through him all the nations would be blessed, and the Old Testament gradually gives shape and contour to this grand prophecy. Finally the Man comes, the One to whom is given the Kingdom. A daily reading of the Old Testament – either chapter by chapter, or as in the Church's liturgical readings – prepares and nourishes a Christian mind. There is a second reason why a strong familiarity with the Old Testament helps the Christian. The figure of Jesus Christ stands out in all his uniqueness when he is set against the backdrop of all that went before him and that pointed to him. Who is there in the Old Testament who can compare with Jesus Christ in his holiness, in his claims and in his deeds? Take the holy Jeremiah, steadfast in his prophetic mission despite the persecution heaped upon him by his enemies. But – to take but one instance – Jeremiah could not in any way match the depths of peace and forgiveness that welled up from the heart of Christ amid his

unparalleled sufferings. *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!* Even the devils cried out in frustration when in the presence of Jesus, *"I know who you are! The Holy One of God!"*

The *claims* made by Jesus Christ are especially extraordinary. Consider our Gospel passage today. A fundamental linchpin of the religious life of God's chosen people derived directly from the third commandment. The nation must observe the Sabbath Day as holy to the Lord. How was this to be done? The scribes and Pharisees represented a tradition of interpretation which imposed a range of practices which in practice went to extremes, especially in the matter of the Sabbath rest. Jesus Christ observed the Sabbath, of course, and we can only imagine how holy he made the day in his own observance. But he absolutely disregarded many of the details of the Pharisaic interpretation and teaching on it. He healed on the Sabbath — although not in every sense, it seems. For instance, we read (Mark 1: 22-34) that, having exorcised a devil in the Synagogue of Capernaum on the Sabbath morning, it was not till the *evening* that he began to heal

"all those who were afflicted, and those who were possessed by devils." Nevertheless, he unhesitatingly healed on various occasions on the Sabbath Day. Indeed, he told the leaders that he, the Son of Man, was Lord even of the Sabbath. In our Gospel today (John 5: 17-30) he replies to the mounting hostility of the leaders to his violations of the received rules of Sabbath rest. He says that, inasmuch as his *own Father* was continually working, *he* would work *too*. He spoke, then, of God as his *very own Father* in a way that was unheard of, and claimed the right to act as he, his heavenly Father, acts. My Father acts thus, *so therefore* do I. "*For this reason,*" we read, "*the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*" What other prophet spoke in a way that gave this clear impression, and even to the very face of the religious leaders? But there was more. The Father loves Jesus "the Son," and "shows him all he does." So there is nothing about God and his ways that Jesus does not know. No prophet spoke thus.

There is much, much more in our passage than this. Jesus has life in himself. He can give life to whomsoever he wills. He is the Judge of all. The time would come when the graves would be opened at his voice. There is no question but that Jesus Christ claimed to be on a par with God – which is to say that he is the one and only God. But he was not the Father, whom elsewhere he said was greater than he – greater because he was his very Father, his Origin in the godhead. Our Lord is thus revealing the ineffable mystery of the Holy Trinity. Let us immerse ourselves in this wonderful passage and contemplate the beautiful Person of Jesus Christ, God and man.



Thursday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104): 3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect We invoke your mercy in humble prayer, O Lord, that you may cause us, your servants, corrected by penance and schooled by good works, to persevere sincerely in your commands and come safely to the paschal festivities. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 105; John 5:31-47

Jesus said, If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favour, and I know that his testimony about me is valid. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. I have testimony weightier than that of

John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept praise from men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say? (John 5: 31-47)

He Has Seen The Father

When St Paul visited Athens he saw a shrine to the "unknown God." He made use of this in his address to the Areopagus, but in the event his efforts to convince were of little avail. He made a point, though, that is full of interest even though I do not wish to explicate its implications here. Rather, I suggest that we dwell on the inability of man to see and know God directly. We take it for granted – as, in a sense, we must – that for all that we see and know directly, we cannot see and know directly the overwhelmingly important and prominent Being who sustains our vast universe. We see the myriads of insects and the range of bird and animal life. We observe the composition and the movements of earth and stars. The study of man and nature as represented in the libraries and literature of the world is so vast as to be far beyond any synthesis. *This* we see. But the *One who sustains everything* we do not see. We know something of this great Being from the visible creation, but our knowledge is fitful and there is little firm agreement among the peoples and religions as to the lineaments of his nature. Yet the religions and literature of man testify to the fact that we long to see and communicate with the One on

whom everything depends. More than this, we long for a revelation from the great Being whom we constantly need. Indeed, it is typical for the religions of man to claim that this revelation has occurred. Mahomet claimed it and others have too, and sadly human history has numerous instances of one religion attempting by force to put down another because of such competing claims. But they all bear testimony to the need for a direct contact with God. Typically man reveres the one who claims to have had this contact, at least if he makes such a claim persuasively. The seers and the prophets – whatever they be called – are honoured unless they conflict with others who claim this position. This religious Fact shows how great a boon man would consider having a person who has seen and known God directly. Such a man would give us what we truly need to know.

This is the reason why the Christian religion offers such good news to the world – this and much more. In our Gospel today (John 5: 31-47), our Lord speaks with sovereign assurance of how totally qualified he is to speak of God. He is more qualified than any

other. Take any of the prophets – take John the Baptist, for instance. What is to be said of Jesus Christ when set next to John? *"You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. I have testimony weightier than that of John."* Whatever reason one might have for accepting the testimony of this greatest of the prophets, the testimony Jesus Christ has is much the greater. Look at his work! Not only do his miracles testify to his authority to speak of God – and who in the history of the world has worked the miracles that Jesus Christ worked, in terms of number and quality? But his work is above all the work of redemption from sin. Now, who in the history of the world has attempted to *take away the sin of the world*? This is a breathtaking proposition, and as a *mission* it has scarcely occurred to anyone anywhere to attempt it. But this was the mission of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist said of him that he is the One who takes away the sin of the world. Further, what is the means of doing this? If we were to have asked the greatest of the

ancient philosophers – say, Socrates, or Plato, or Aristotle – how the *sin of the world* could be taken away, what would be the response? I suspect they would have been nonplussed, even if they had understood the terms of the question (such as the true meaning of *sin*). But that was Christ's grand mission, and the way to attain it was by his Passion and Death. He is unique in his claims and in the support for his claims. But most of all, he has seen the living God. "*You have never heard his voice nor seen his form,*" our Lord says to his enemies. He, Jesus of Nazareth, "heard his voice" continually, and continually saw "his form," the "form" of the Father.

Let us recognize the authority of Jesus Christ. It is supreme. He comes from God, with whom he dwelt from all eternity. He is the Father's only-begotten Son, and mankind has the inestimable blessing of having, as a brother man, One who is God himself. There is in our midst the One who knows all things and has opened for us the way to God by his Passion and Death. Let us regard him as our Light, then! He, the Light of the world, without whom we are in the dark!



Friday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 54 (53): 3-4 O God, save me by your name; by your power, defend my cause. O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth.

Collect O God, who have prepared fitting helps for us in our weakness, grant, we pray, that we may receive their healing effects with joy and reflect them in a holy way of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Wisdom 2: 1.12-22; Psalm 33; John 7: 1-2.10.25-30

Jesus moved around in Galilee; he did not wish to travel in Judea, because the Jews were trying to kill him. The Jewish feast of Tabernacles was near. When his brothers had gone up to the feast, he himself also went up, not openly but as it were in secret. Some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem said, "Is he not the one they are trying to kill? And look, he is speaking openly and they say nothing to

him. Could the authorities have realized that he is the Christ? But we know where he is from. When the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from." So Jesus cried out in the temple area as he was teaching and said, "You know me and also know where I am from. Yet I did not come on my own, but the one who sent me, whom you do not know, is true. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me." So they tried to arrest him, but no one laid a hand upon him, because his hour had not yet come. (John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30)

Man and God One thing about our Lord is plain in the passage before us today. His Person and background is well known. He is one of the people. He is a brother Hebrew to them. There is mention of "*his brothers*" who went up to the feast before him. They were, of course, his kinsmen, presumably from Nazareth and its environs. There is a tradition that the parents of Mary had resided in the nearby cosmopolitan city of Zephoris, so some of our Lord's relatives may even have lived there. Whatever of that, the point is that our Lord was deeply rooted in certain places and in a family network. He was very

well known. That was up in Galilee, in the locality of Nazareth. Let us observe the specimen of the talk about him in Jerusalem which is provided by our passage. Our Lord went up to the feast quietly and then was discovered to be teaching in the Temple. We read that *"Some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem said, 'Is he not the one they are trying to kill? And look, he is speaking openly and they say nothing to him. Could the authorities have realized that he is the Christ? But we know where he is from. When the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from.'"* The drift of it is that Jesus was one of the people, and that this was a problem. He was but an ordinary Hebrew, an artisan from Galilee – all knew who Jesus of Nazareth was and where he was from. He lacked the mystery of origins that would be associated with the Messiah. In his origin and his person the Messiah would be far, far larger than life, a figure the like of which the world had never seen. All of this was perfectly true in its way, and did reflect the general impression projected by the Scriptures. But other predictions were missed that located the Messiah as coming from the people. What these reactions and remarks illustrate was the truth that Jesus Christ was truly

and absolutely a *man like us*. In all his human characteristics he possessed an individuality with the limitations which this necessarily involved. He was of a certain height, with certain features, a certain timbre of voice, a certain manner of walking, speaking, smiling. The Messiah was very much a man of a certain lineage, time and culture.

All this our Lord openly and readily acknowledges. "*Jesus cried out in the temple area as he was teaching and said, "You know me and also know where I am from."* That is to say, I am a man just as are others, and you know me as such. But then he alludes to the tremendous mystery that is his nevertheless. "*Yet I did not come on my own, but the one who sent me, whom you do not know, is true. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.*" Our Lord speaks in a way that transcends the language of the prophets, though he is in the line of them. He repeatedly insists that he came from God. The prophets spoke of having been called by God for a special mission, and of having received his word which they then proclaimed to the people, despite much opposition. Not uncommonly they would refer to their

place of origin and their occupation prior to their calling. But Jesus Christ speaks of himself as coming not simply from Nazareth, but *directly from God*. He states time and again that while many of his hearers did not know God, *he* knew him. Our Lord separates himself from the rest in his incomparable knowledge of God, a knowledge that he has directly because he came directly from him. "*I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.*" Our Lord is claiming a unique relationship with God, a uniquely authoritative mission, and a unique knowledge. This singular authority was what the religious leaders could not bear, and we read that after our Lord said this, "*they tried to arrest him, but no one laid a hand upon him, because his hour had not yet come*" (John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30). It all constitutes yet another allusion – so frequent especially in the Gospel of St John – to his *divinity*. This is the wondrous thing about Jesus Christ, and it is what makes the Christian religion so striking, provided it is truly understood. This man, truly man – one whom they knew so well as almost to disqualify Jesus Christ from being the Messiah, in their mind

– is the living God. We simply must not "get used" to this proposition. There is nothing like it on earth.

Let us in our mind's eye, in spirit as it were, place ourselves among the hearers and gaze at Jesus Christ as he speaks. Observe his features, so noble, so filled with spiritual majesty, so expressive of divine love and strength. He is every bit a man as any man, indeed far more so because there is no sin in him to sully or deform his humanity. He is, in this sense, perfectly man, perfectly human. But in the first instance he is divine. He is a divine Person who has come from the Father as One sent by him. This same Jesus Christ is with us continually in his Church, in the word and Sacraments of the Church. Let us live in him then, and never be separated from him.



Saturday of the Fourth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17): 5, 7 The waves of death rose about me; the pains of the netherworld surrounded me. In my anguish I called to the Lord, and from his holy temple he heard my voice.

Collect May the working of your mercy, O Lord, we pray, direct our hearts aright, for without your grace we cannot find favour in your sight. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 7:2-3, 9bc-12;
John 7:40-53

On hearing his words, some of the people said, Surely this man is the Prophet. Others said, He is the Christ. Still others asked, How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived? Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him. Finally the temple

guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, Why didn't you bring him in? No one ever spoke the way this man does, the guards declared. You mean he has deceived you also? the Pharisees retorted. Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law- there is a curse on them. Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing? They replied, Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee. Then each went to his own home. (John 7:40-53)

Faith and the human heart Our passage today ends on a sombre note which has significance for every person of every place. We are told that "the chief priests and the Pharisees," having declared that "a prophet does not come out of Galilee," then "*went each to his own home.*" Let us imagine the body of the leaders in council, gathered perhaps in the Temple precincts and filled with anger, envy and

consternation at the fearlessness of Jesus Christ speaking elsewhere in the same Temple. They had sent the temple guard to bring our Lord before them, but once in the presence of Jesus, the guard were captivated and helpless. Spellbound by his words, his Person and his teaching, they listened and watched, as did the people. They were not prejudiced in heart against our Lord, and could not bring themselves to arrest him. His spiritual majesty was so evident and his teaching so exalted. So they returned – for they knew they were being awaited – and could only say, "*No one ever spoke the way this man does.*" We may say that this judgment encapsulates John the Evangelist's view of the situation. No one in all the history of God's chosen people spoke as Jesus Christ spoke, and no other man in all of history has spoken as he spoke. This was because it was the Incarnate God himself who was speaking. Yet, mysteriously, the response of man was profoundly mixed. This indeed is a mysterious phenomenon because one would have expected that in the nature of the case, the creature would instinctively respond in an entirely positive fashion to the words of his loving Creator, even if due to the Incarnation his Creator were not

immediately recognized. But no. The response to our Lord was mixed. Though many of the people accepted him, many others were divided about him. The leaders in the main were against him. Christ had but limited success, and his success has been limited ever since. Many rejected him, as do many still. In order to understand the roots of this rejection, let us consider especially those who rejected him entirely. I refer to the leaders of the people.

To the testimony of the guards, the religious leaders replied "*You mean he has deceived you also?*" There was a profound prejudice at work in their hearts that impeded any listening on their part. "*Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law – there is a curse on them*" (John 7:40-53). They supported each other in their blindness, choosing to view those who followed our Lord as being under a curse. The situation is further illustrated by the question of Nicodemus, one of their number. The loyalty of Nicodemus to our Lord, incidentally, shows that our Lord had at least a small following even among the

leaders. Joseph of Arimathea was also among them. We remember that some time later the infant church records a considerable number of *priests* entering the Church (Acts 6:7). Be that as it may, Nicodemus objected. "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?" The leaders refused even to hear our Lord with an open heart, and to find out what he was doing. Their hearts were set against him, and they would not listen. Of course, they did not know or intimate that he was divine, and all of our Lord's allusions to this stupendous fact fell on stony hearts. In this sense, they did not know what they were doing. On the cross our Lord asked his Father to forgive them for they did not know what they were doing. But it is equally clear that they were responsible for their ignorance. They were blind, but their blindness was due to their moral fault. Their hostility grew apace with our Lord's ministry, and as our Lord revealed more and more of his powers, his Person and his teaching, so did their hatred of him increase. The final scene in this drama is, of course, Calvary, in which our Lord is hanging from the cross and the religious leaders are jeering at him. They did not realize that they were jeering at God,

dying in his humanity for love of mankind. It is a remarkable phenomenon in history. Let us draw from this spectacle a sense of the horror of sin and what it leads to.

Faith in Jesus Christ and the perception of the true nature of his Person depends very much on our moral condition. It is not just an intellectual matter, divorced from one's state of heart. What we see depends on what we are. *Blessed are the pure of heart*, our Lord said, *for they shall see God*. The mixed response to our Lord was a result of the mixed moral condition of those who viewed and heard him. Let us strive for true goodness of heart, for this is the foundation and requirement for a true faith.



Fifth Sunday of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 43 (42): 1-2 Give me justice, O God, and
plead my cause against a nation that is faithless. From the deceitful and
cunning rescue me, for you, O God, are my strength.

Collect By your help, we beseech you, Lord our God, may we walk eagerly in that same charity with which, out of love for the world, your Son handed himself over to death. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 125;
Philippians 3:8-14; John 8:1-11.

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered round him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of

adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say? They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her. Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? No one, sir, she said. Then neither do I condemn you, Jesus declared. Go now and leave your life of sin. (John 8: 1-11)

The Law and the Sixth Commandment Our Gospel passage today provides us with yet another instance of the conflict between Christ and the religious leaders – specifically, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. This conflict would culminate in our Lord's death, by which he would redeem the world from sin. The accusations by which Jesus was

condemned to death included his acting against the temple in Jerusalem, his acting against faith in the one God because he proclaimed himself to be the Son of God, and in general for his acting against the Law. Such accusations were groundless, but in our Gospel today the leaders confront our Lord with a prescription of the Law of Moses. "*Teacher,*" they said, "*this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?*" They were intent on showing up Christ's opposition to the Law of Moses. Now, elsewhere our Lord stated quite clearly that he did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to complete and fulfill them. Time and again he referred lovingly to the prophets. He insisted on the fulfilment of what the Law truly required, and we remember how at his Transfiguration, Moses representing the Law and Elijah representing the prophets, appeared with him in glory. They were conversing with him about his death which he would accomplish in Jerusalem. Jesus did not abolish the Law given by God to Moses on Sinai, but rather he fulfilled it by giving to it its definitive *interpretation*. The issue was indeed one of interpretation. We

remember how he was challenged over the matter of divorce, which Moses allowed. Christ thereupon gave his *authoritative interpretation* of this Mosaic permission. The allowance of divorce by Moses was merely, our Lord said, a practical regulation of the hardness of heart of the people. They would not observe the law of God as revealed in the original creation of man and woman with the vocation to be "one body," as husband and wife. Moses regulated this sad refusal for the sake of social order. In his person, in his teaching and in his practice, Christ fulfilled the Mosaic Law and gave to it its true *interpretation*.

The case in point in our Gospel today (John 8: 1-11) was the ancient Mosaic directive to stone those guilty of adultery (as in, say, Deuteronomy 22:22 and Leviticus 20:10). Rather than dwelling further on our Lord's teaching on the status of this prescription, let us consider its deeper significance. *It shows the seriousness of the sixth commandment*, You shall not commit adultery, which in ancient times it was meant to protect. At the end of the incident described in today's Gospel, with our Lord having rid the scene of the woman's accusers, he

told her: Go, and sin no more. He set aside the stoning, but reaffirmed the sixth commandment. Although the biblical text of the sixth commandment simply reads "you shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14), the Tradition of the Church comprehensively includes the teachings of the entire Scriptures, and considers the sixth commandment as encompassing all sins against chastity. Grave sins against chastity go well beyond adultery and include the various expressions of the vice of lust – such as the reading and use of pornography, homosexual acts, fornication, masturbation, and the social decadence that tends to undermine a culture of chastity. Very importantly, our Lord himself extended the scope of the sixth commandment and condemned *adultery in the human heart*. That is to say, not only must a person be chaste in deed, but also in mind and heart. This, indeed, is the foundation. Chastity is a moral virtue, a gift of God, a grace, and a fruit of the Holy Spirit to be resolutely lived and guarded. It embraces a whole life of chastity, in keeping with each person's particular state of life, and is part and parcel of a life lived in imitation of Christ our Saviour and model. There is a further point of

great importance. The Christian laity are called to evangelize the world. The world must be brought to accept Christ and his teaching. This includes bearing witness to chastity in culture and society. It means spreading everywhere the conviction that the dignity of the person requires protections for chastity in the culture and civil law of society.

One of the most notable changes in society over the last century has been the vast proliferation of media and entertainment. This has meant the spread and influence of a range of models of what it means to be human and happy. All too often these types and models have been of persons who disregard and violate a life of chastity. The battle is largely a cultural one, and the challenge is to evangelize our culture. Let us take up the work, then, and pursue it daily by word and deed.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 577-582 (Jesus and the Law),.2331-2391: (The sixth commandment).

A Second Reflection: (John 8: 1-11)

"He looked up and said, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir' she replied. 'Neither do I condemn you,' said Jesus 'go away and don't sin any more.'" (John 8:11)

Sin and Grace In the Gospel scene today, the Church presents us with the scene of the sinful woman and her accusers standing before our Lord. Then she is left in his presence, her accusers gone, herself a sinner nevertheless. Our Lord says to her, I extend my mercy and pardon to you. Go and do not sin any more. Let this scene be an image of what should be going on during Lent in our own hearts. Cardinal Newman once wrote that the foundation of authentic religion is the sense of sin. With a lively sense of personal sin, we more easily turn to Christ asking for his forgiveness. Well, let us imagine our sins *being like those scribes and Pharisees*, accusing us before our divine Lord,

and demanding that he punish us. In fact that is just what Satan does. He tempts us to sin, gains the victory, and then becomes our accuser, our adversary before God. For that reason our Lord described the Holy Spirit as our Advocate, pleading our cause from within the very heart of God. He is the love of God himself consoling us sinners. And so we ought stand before Jesus during Lent with our sins. Our sins will accuse us, if we have a lively conscience. But if we come *before Jesus* admitting our sins and asking his pardon, and not simply remain with our *conscience alone*, we shall hear those consoling words of Jesus, "Neither do I condemn you." All of this we are able to do and experience in every genuine act of contrition, and whenever we go to The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

We shall also hear him say, *go and sin no more*. This too should distinguish the weeks of Lent: namely, a new impulse in our quest for holiness of life. The years will pass quickly for each of us, and the question will be, how well have I used my life for the purpose for which it was given to me? Its purpose is to reach the fullest degree

of love and service of God possible for me. In the second reading, St Paul says that the supreme value in his life was to know Christ and to live in him. By comparison with this all else was rubbish, he said. He sought perfection in this. There are many things we try to excel in during life: perhaps in our possessions, in our professional standing, our job, or whatever. But the one thing necessary is, St Paul writes, to know Christ and the power of his risen life in our lives, which is to say the power of grace. Saint Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises* presents the retreatant with his greatest colloquy, in which God's love and grace are prayed for. The one thing we should be praying for day by day which is absolutely and in every sense necessary, is the love and the grace of Christ. Neither life nor death, great possessions or few, health or sickness, important though these things may be in certain real respects, compare with knowing Christ as his genuine, intimate and faithful friend, and following him in his sufferings so as to share in his resurrection. St Paul says, *'Not that I have become perfect yet: I have not yet won, but I am still running, trying to capture the prize for which*

Christ Jesus captured me. I am racing for the finish, for the prize to which God calls us upwards to receive in Christ Jesus.'

Let us resolve during Lent to confess our sins, obtain Christ's pardon, and to set out anew in a vigorous way towards holiness, which is nothing other than the love and the obedient service of Jesus in our everyday life. A great psychiatrist, Victor Frankl, once said that human happiness depends on a person's having a sense of *meaning* in life and living in view of it. Of course, the next question is, what is the *true* meaning of life? The true meaning of life, the one revealed to us by God, is to know, love and serve Jesus as perfectly as possible. Let this Lent involve a profound renewal of our sense of the true meaning of life, which is to belong totally to Jesus.



Monday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 56 (55): 2 Have mercy on me, O God, for people assail me; they fight me all day long and oppress me.

Collect O God, by whose wondrous grace we are enriched with every blessing, grant us so to pass from former ways to newness of life, that we may be made ready for the glory of the heavenly Kingdom. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Daniel 13:1-9.15-17.19-30.33-62; Psalm 22;
John 8:12-20

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. The Pharisees challenged him, Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid. Jesus answered, Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I

know where I came from and where I am going. But you have no idea where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one. But if I do judge, my decisions are right, because I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me. In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid. I am one who testifies for myself; my other witness is the Father, who sent me. Then they asked him, Where is your father? You do not know me or my Father, Jesus replied. If you knew me, you would know my Father also. He spoke these words while teaching in the temple area near the place where the offerings were put. Yet no one seized him, because his time had not yet come. (John 8: 12-20)

The Claims of Christ

One of the more notorious of modern forensic inventions is the lie detector. The basis of its assumed validity seems to be an analysis of the recorded emotions and physical reactions of the one who is speaking, reactions that are deemed to be beyond the easy control of the mind. The analysis can take different forms and can employ different kinds of data to judge the reactions of the

subject. Despite margins of error, such methods are admissible in some courts of, for instance, the United States. Whatever be the extent of the usefulness of such devices, there is no doubt that in ordinary life we do instinctively form impressions of the truthfulness of a person's account by the *physical* manner in which he gives it. He *appears* calm, objective and balanced or not as the case may be, although we also take into account our *prior* knowledge of him and the opinion of others about him. If we know from prior experience that he can lie while showing little sign of this in his *manner*, we take this into account. A skilled person may well be able to form a pretty good idea of how truthful a person is, by observing carefully his *manner* in telling his story. His judgment that a person is likely to be truthful or lying can carry true weight. We all do this to some extent, as we must – even though we are aware that an experienced "con-man" (as we call him) may deceive trained listeners and observers. Many issues are so unimportant that it does not matter to anyone whether the person is truthful or not, as in say, some "true story" a person tells to entertain others in conversation. But other matters are of maximum

importance. The pre-eminent case of the critical importance of truth is a claim to have received a divine revelation. There have been so many such claims, and so many of them have won the allegiance of great numbers right into the modern era. The Baha'i religion was founded by an alleged prophet, as was the Seventh Day Adventist religion. By and large the ordinary person acts and judges on instinct, on a degree of education and on common sense to determine the truth or otherwise of such claims. He is most fortunate if, by the providence of God, he is in fact raised in the truth that has been truly and objectively revealed.

This is not the moment to consider the ways a "prophet" is vindicated in his claims. Rather, with the above remarks as an introduction, I would like to draw attention to the transcendent claims of Jesus Christ and to the spiritual majesty with which he uttered them. St Jerome once wrote that ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Jesus Christ. In whatever way such a statement is to be understood – and we could hardly exclude the numerous illiterates from the saving knowledge of Christ – there is no doubt that the long use of

the Scriptures gives to the believer a profound conviction of the absolute persuasiveness of Jesus Christ. In particular, the daily reading and contemplation of the Gospels will convince the Christian that Jesus Christ is what he claimed to be. It is very much like growing in a long-standing friendship. In such an acquaintance, the person comes to be known. By immersing ourselves in the Gospels, we contemplate Jesus Christ and we come to know him for what he claims to be. In our Gospel today, our Lord makes a claim that I am not aware was made by any other serious and weighty individual in history. He says – and he calmly says it to the religious leaders who regarded themselves as the light of the nation – that "*I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*" (John 8: 12-20). No other individual in all of the inspired Scriptures, and indeed – I think I can say – no one else of consequence in human history, had the temerity to say such a thing. But Jesus Christ said this with sovereign and imperturbable assurance, all the while uttering a unique teaching backed up with incomparable holiness of life and miracles. He is the Light of the nations. This Light that is his very Person bestows

abundant life on the world. If man wishes to have life in abundance, eternal life, he must live in the Light that is Jesus Christ. There is so much darkness in human history! Jesus Christ has told us that he is the Light that dispels the darkness. He comes from the Father; he stands with the Father; the Father is always his witness.

Let us draw near to Jesus who is the treasure and the Light of mankind. He stands unique among the prophets and utterly transcends them, be they the prophets of the inspired Scriptures, or those taken to be prophets by the peoples. He is the Prophet par excellence, and far more than a prophet could be because he is none other – O marvellous a fact! – than the Lord God himself. He, this man among men, is literally and truly God. How extraordinary a thing that the created, material universe contained such a Phenomenon. God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to be the Light of the world. By walking according to this Light, life everlasting will be ours.

A Second Reflection: (Daniel 13:1-9.15-17.19-30.33-62)

“Then the whole assembly shouted, blessing God the Saviour of those who trust in him.” (Dan. 13)

The Saviour Our first reading today from the Old Testament book of Daniel presents us with the well-known story of Suzanna and her vindication by Daniel. She was *falsely accused of immorality by two who colluded against her and she had no supporting witness*. *“The Lord heard her cry and, as she was being led away to die, he roused the holy spirit residing in a young boy named Daniel”* (Daniel 13: 1-9.15-17.19-30.33-62). Daniel cross-examined the two accusers and showed their complete inconsistency. We are given the message of the story at the end. It tells us about God: *“Then the whole assembly shouted, blessing God, the Saviour of those who trust in him.”* God is shown as the saviour of those who trust in him and take their stand by the truth. He will put down the one who chooses falsehood. Just how this is played out in the course of human life and the history of the world is a further matter, but ultimately God is a God of the truth. In our Gospel today our Lord fulfills this great message of the Old Testament. *“I am*

the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark; he will have the light of life.” (John 8: 12 30) At the beginning of his Gospel St John tells us that *"in him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness ... the Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."* Christ was the light because he was the Truth. At the Last Supper our Lord said to his disciples that *"I am the Way the Truth and the Life."* Our Lord bore witness to the Truth in his public life and ministry and supremely at his death. During his Passion he said to Pontius Pilate, *"For this I was born, for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth."* His witness to the Truth was vindicated by his heavenly Father when he raised him from the dead.

The Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son to the Church in order to empower Christ's disciples to bear witness before all nations to the Truth of Jesus. Let us resolve to live by the Truth down to the last detail. The Truth is to be found supremely in the Person of Jesus. We are called to live in that Truth and bear witness to it.



Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 27 (26): 14 Wait for the Lord; be strong; be stout-hearted, and wait for the Lord!

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord, perseverance in obeying your will, that in our days the people dedicated to your service may grow in both merit and number. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Numbers 21: 4-9; Psalm 101; John 8: 21-30

Once more Jesus said to them, "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come." This made the Jews ask, "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, 'Where I

go, you cannot come'?" But he continued, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am, you will indeed die in your sins." "Who are you?" they asked. "Just what I have been claiming all along," Jesus replied. "I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is true, and what I have heard from him I tell the world." They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him. (John 8: 21-30)

The Key to Life Occasionally one comes across those who do not seem to care when thinking of physical death as the absolute end of everything for a person. One fairly elderly person said to me that as far as he was concerned, death for him would be the same as it is for any

animal. It would be the end, with nothing beyond it. Now, this belief is most uncharacteristic of human thought. In the main, man is and always has been religious, and religion almost always includes belief in an Afterlife. Man expects to continue in some form after death, although the views and images of the Afterlife have been legion. There is an immense difference between the Afterlife of Judaeo-Christian revelation and that of Buddhism, for instance. We all know (even if we do not *realize* it) that death must come, but this thought is assuaged by the prospect of an Afterlife – which is to say, we believe that after death, life will continue. The thought of death in an absolute sense is a shocking prospect. All this is to say that *life* is one of our most precious possessions, even though we usually take it somewhat for granted. If there is any threat to our *life*, our whole being is roused in fear and apprehension – and even animals respond in similar fashion. If a loved one embarks on a course which may mean the loss of *life* – as in some military campaign – then his family and friends become immensely concerned. They dread the day they might receive notice that he has lost his life. Clearly, one of the principal goals of a society is to ensure

the preservation of the *lives* of its citizens. A culture that undervalues life and allows its destruction for reasons of convenience or for trivial misdemeanours is to that extent closer to barbarism. Now, we may ask, if life is one of our greatest possessions, is there any key to its secure possession? We try to eat properly, maintain good health, and avoid unnecessary dangers such as driving recklessly on the roads. Life is a truly precious gift, and in all sorts of ways our conviction of this, and the conviction of society about this, is manifest. But we cannot hang on to our *physical* life indefinitely. What, then, is the key to life's flourishing?

Our Lord in today's Gospel (John 8:21-30) gives us the key to attaining, holding on to, and flourishing in the gift of life. To begin with, he tells us what is the ultimate threat to life. It is *sin*. The average person in a secular culture assumes that the ultimate threats to life are those he sees as destroying *physical* life. Life is threatened ultimately, he thinks, by hunger, disease, neglect, imprudence in health, and so forth. But Christ has revealed that the ultimate threat to life is sin and

its consequent separation from God. St Paul writes that sin entered the world through one man and with sin came death, and death has spread to the whole human race. In our Gospel passage today, our Lord tells his hearers that they will die in their sins. This is the ultimate tragedy, to die in one's sins, for this will bring the ultimate death – not a death that is extinction, but a *dying forever*, as it were. It will be an eternal separation from God. Horrible thought! It is the ultimate fate of the demons, and such is the lot of the one who does not die in God but in his sins. So what does our Lord provide as the key to the possession of life? The key to life is belief in him and in his word. *"I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come."* He was going to his Father, to life forever at the right hand of God, and he was telling his hearers that the course they were presently pursuing would lead them to death in their sins. *"You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am, you will indeed die in your sins."* The one way to avoid ultimate death is to believe in the One whom God had sent, and who had been with him from

eternity. Significantly, our Lord alludes to his divinity and to belief in this fundamental doctrine. *"If you do not believe that I am, you will indeed die in your sins"* – the "I am" is a clear reference to the name that Yahweh God had pronounced before Moses as being his own. On a different occasion, just before he raised Lazarus from the dead, our Lord had said to Martha that the one who believes in him will live, even though he die. The key is faith in Jesus.

On a separate occasion again, our Lord was visiting the home of Mary and Martha. He said to Martha that Mary her sister had chosen the better part in sitting before him and listening to his word. The most important thing in life is to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Saviour, and to live according to his word. This belief constitutes the key to life. By means of this, death is overcome in its ultimate sense, and we live now and forever in God. Let us then take our stand with Jesus, knowing that being with him is the one thing necessary.



Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17): 48-49 My deliverer from angry nations, you set me above my assailants; you saved me from the violent man, O Lord.

Collect Enlighten, O God of compassion, the hearts of your children, sanctified by penance, and in your kindness grant those you stir to a sense of devotion a gracious hearing when they cry out to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Daniel 3:14-20.91-95; Psalm Daniel 3; John 8:31-42

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. They answered him, We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free? Jesus replied, I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the

family, but a son belongs to it for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father. Abraham is our father, they answered. If you were Abraham's children, said Jesus, then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does. We are not illegitimate children, they protested. The only Father we have is God himself. Jesus said to them, If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. (John 8:31- 42)

Christ and His Teaching It is possible to hold to the importance of Christ, while in effect discounting somewhat the lived practice of his teaching. In a so called "Christian country" where the Christian religion is the one accepted by the majority of the population, there is little *open*

opposition to the Person of Jesus Christ. To begin with, open opposition would immediately draw the fire of convinced Christians. While this does not eliminate the formal expression of anti-Christian opinion (in the way anti-Islamic opinion would be eliminated in a Muslim country), it usually results in it being expressed respectfully. In a "Christian country" Christ is respected and most people would describe themselves as Christian. But what does this mean? It very often does not mean the acceptance of and holding to the teaching of Jesus Christ. Christ is allowed and a person may count himself a Christian. But he unhesitatingly makes up his own mind as to what teachings he holds to be those of Jesus Christ, and even dismisses those that he recognizes to be of Christ but which happen to be very inconvenient. It is one result of the modern authority of private judgment. In previous eras, cultures accepted authority easily. Now, we make up our own mind – and this approach we apply to religion. In the face of all this, let us notice how our Lord describes the Christian – which is to say, the disciple of Jesus Christ. In our Gospel passage today, our Lord says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my

disciples.” To be a Christian, it is absolutely critical that one truly hold to the teaching of Jesus Christ, and a holding to that teaching does not merely mean a vague intellectual acceptance – but a practical living of it. We cannot say that we hold to something if despite this we act in a way that is contrary to it. If we hold to the teaching of Christ, then as Cardinal Newman often pointed out, we must *fear* lest we be mistaken about it. But not many have this fear. They make up their own minds, with little apprehension lest they not be holding at all to the teaching of Jesus Christ. They do not care.

There are further implications of this, and our Lord draws them out in our passage today. To begin with, our Lord says that his teaching is the truth. If we hold to his teaching, we shall know the truth: "*Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*" Our Lord is referring to an inner freedom of mind and heart at the very roots of our being. There are, then, two things which affect us at the foundations of our spirit: *accepting* the truth that comes from Christ, and *refusing* to accept it. The denial of Christ's truth will ensnare us in sin, and by this

denial we shall be enslaved. *"They answered him, We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free? Jesus replied, I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."* One of the great gains of modern culture and thought is its emphasis on freedom, but co-terminus with this gain has been a serious loss. It is the disassociation of freedom from truth. Freedom is considered to be the freedom to do what one likes, whereas true freedom is the capacity to do what is right – which is to say what is in accord with the truth. It takes a great deal of inner and spiritual freedom to do what is right, especially when there are great internal and external pressures to do what is wrong. For example, one's long standing memories may constitute a great pressure to be unforgiving. It could be extremely difficult to forgive if we remain in our memories. It takes a great deal of inner freedom to forgive when such memories crowd in upon the imagination. Our Lord tells us that truly holding to his teaching is the way forward to the truth and to

freedom. This applies to hatred, bitterness, lust, sloth and to all the capital sins leading man to slavery and to death. If we wish to be free, we must choose to hold to the truth of Jesus Christ, which is, as our Lord insists, what is involved in truly being his disciple.

Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the touchstone of true religion and of a true relationship with God. Our Lord tells those who claim to have God for their Father while rejecting him, that *"If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me"* (John 8: 31-42). This is very serious for the person who actually rejects Christ's teaching, therefore rejecting Christ himself. It is something that each Christian must bring to the secular world of his everyday life.



Thursday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Heb 9: 15 Christ is mediator of a New Covenant, so that by means of his death, those who are called may receive the promise of an eternal inheritance.

Collect Be near, O Lord, to those who plead before you, and look kindly on those who place their hope in your mercy, that, cleansed from the stain of their sins, they may persevere in holy living and be made full heirs of your promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 17:3-9; Psalm 105:4-9; John 8:51-59

I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death. At this the Jews exclaimed, Now we know that you are demon -possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father

Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are? Jesus replied, If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad. You are not yet fifty years old, the Jews said to him, and you have seen Abraham! I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I am! At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. (John 8:51-59)

Abraham! *Before Abraham was born, I am!* According to the internal chronology of the Old Testament (i.e., let us say, going on life spans of the Patriarchs, the period of time cited for the period of the children of Israel in Egypt, etc., etc.), Abraham lived between 1700 and 1900 BC. Still, there is little in the Genesis narrative about him that can be specifically identified with external documented history in the early

second millennium. Of course, this can be said of much of the Old Testament historical texts – such as the life and deeds of Moses, Samuel, Elijah or Isaiah. But the implications of this? Archaeologist and Professor of Religious Studies Paula McNutt informs her readers that "it is now widely agreed that the so-called 'patriarchal/ancestral period' is a later literary construct, not a period in the actual history of the ancient world" (*Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel*. 1999, p. 42). So the “*so-called patriarchal period is a literary construct, not a period in the actual history of the ancient world*”. This is in line with a widespread debunking of the historicity of the Old Testament, and it is based on the lack of supporting external evidence of a certain kind. Scholars such as William F. Albright and Albrecht Alt had considered the Patriarchs to be real individuals living in the "patriarchal age", but in the latter part of the twentieth century this view was not that of certain circles of scholars. For instance, Thomas Thompson believes that no compelling evidence indicated that the Patriarchs lived in the second millennium, and that in any case the biblical texts reflected first millennium biblical concerns (*The Historicity of the Patriarchal*

Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham, 1974). “Compelling evidence” comes from disciplines such as archaeology. William Dever (in *What Did the Biblical Writers Know, and when Did They Know It?: What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel*. 2002, p. 98) tells us that by the beginning of the 21st century, archaeologists had "given up hope of recovering any context that would make Abraham, Isaac or Jacob credible 'historical figures'". Notice the assumption that is present here: archaeology and its related disciplines is the basis for the credibility of the historicity of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Indeed, archaeology seems almost to be the authority on the interpretation of scripture – its *magisterium*.

Now, of course, we can go a fair distance with such scholars – to a point. No one is claiming that there *is* archaeological evidence for whole sections of the Biblical narrative, including Genesis. Who would search for archaeological support for Genesis 1-3? Who would understand Genesis 1 as a literal account of the process of creation? Archaeology and ancient clay texts can help us a great deal in

guessing what might be historically probable, but there is an enormous amount that it cannot confirm or deny. To mention but one factor – the enormously important matter of strong oral traditions, under the guidance of the Spirit of God. There is also the matter of written parchment records being long in possession, being lost, then regained, and having their influence on oral tradition – which is then finally put into written form under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. 2 Kings 22: 8 records the discovery of “the book of the Law, in the house of the Lord” – that is, Moses’ book of the Law. So does 2 Chronicles 34: 14 – “Hilkiah the priest found the book of the Law of the Lord given through Moses.” So there were other factors shaping the inspired tradition which found eventual expression in the Scriptures – for which there is no *archaeological* evidence. Numbers 21:9 tells us that Moses made a bronze serpent and attached it to a pole. Well, centuries later King Hezekiah instituted a religious reform and destroyed “the bronze serpent that Moses had made”, for the children of Israel by that stage “burned incense to it; it was called Nebushtan” (2 Kings 18:4). This is (internal) corroborating evidence for the fact of the bronze serpent in

the desert, and (of course) for the fact of Moses himself. As a matter of fact in some cases *extra-Biblical sources* do much more for us. For instance, they specify King Hezekiah by name, along with his reign and influence. Archaeologist Amihai Mazar has stated that the tensions between Assyria and Judah to be one of the best-documented events of the Iron Age. The real point here, though, is that, while empirical science can be valuable, we must not allow it to become the religious authority as to the fact and meaning of divine revelation. Who is our authority? Our ultimate authority is *Jesus Christ*. He clearly taught the inspiration of the Scriptures, and, incidentally, the historicity of Abraham. Indeed, he gives us details about him not provided by the ancient texts. *Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.*

There is a key to the meaning of the Holy Scriptures and a firm foundation for belief in its inspiration. It is Jesus Christ and his teaching. He is the key to its true understanding. *Before Abraham was born, I am!* But there is more – for Jesus Christ founded his Church,

and gave to its visible rock the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 16: 18-19). He promised to send to his Church the divine Spirit to teach all things to it and to enable it to remember what he, Jesus, had said (John 14: 26). Thus, the Church, Christ's body and oracle, the vehicle of his presence and action in the world from generation to generation, is the Christian's *magisterium* or authority on the meaning of Scripture. Let us beware of alternative religious authorities which we allow to insinuate themselves into the sanctuary of our hearts. Our hearts are for Jesus Christ.



Friday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 31 (30): 10, 16, 18 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in distress. Deliver me from the hands of my enemies and those who pursue me. O Lord, let me never be put to shame, for I call on you.

Collect Pardon the offenses of your peoples, we pray, O Lord, and in your goodness set us free from the bonds of the sins we have committed in our weakness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, who in this season give your Church the grace to imitate devoutly the Blessed Virgin Mary in contemplating the Passion of Christ, grant, we pray, through her intercession, that we may cling more firmly each day to your Only Begotten Son and come at last to the

fullness of his grace. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 20: 10-13; Psalm 17; John 10: 31-42

The Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me? We are not stoning you for any of these, replied the Jews, but for blasphemy, because you, a man, claim to be God. Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? If he called them 'gods', to whom the word of God came- and the Scripture cannot be broken-what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father. Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp. Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptising in the early

days. Here he stayed and many people came to him. They said, Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true. And in that place many believed in Jesus. (John 10:31-42)

Christ is God One of the most fascinating movements within Anglican history was the Oxford Movement, which had its origins in the late 1820s at Oxford University, and formally beginning in 1833. Its principal purpose was the restoration in Anglicanism of orthodox Christian belief and of the authority of the Church. In the late 1820s – before the Movement formally began – there arrived at Oxford University a man by the name of Joseph Blanco White, and Newman and he became fast friends. Blanco White was a Spaniard by birth, and had been ordained a Catholic priest in Spain. He had gradually abandoned the Catholic Faith and fled to England during the Napoleonic war in Spain. By the time of his arrival in England he was virtually an atheist, but he came to embrace the Anglican Faith and was ordained an Anglican clergyman. He arrived in Oxford after many

years in England and was granted a degree by the University for his publications attacking the Catholic religion. He then settled there as a Fellow of Oriel College. During the years 1827 to about 1830 Newman and he were close friends within this University College, although soon differences in religious belief began to be evident. My point in mentioning Blanco White is that he illustrates the centrality of the doctrine of the *divinity* of Jesus Christ. He gradually came to look on Jesus Christ as no more than an eminent religious man, an outstanding leader of religion. He ended his days a Unitarian (that is, denying Christ's divinity and the doctrine of the Trinity), and his lengthy posthumous biography was edited and published by the Unitarian minister, John Hamilton Thom. In it the story of his journey from Catholic belief to Unitarianism is traced. Newman saw Blanco White's life as a tragedy of the loss of orthodox Christian belief. At its heart was the loss of belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Newman himself went on to be England's intellectual champion of Christianity as expressed in its orthodox Creed, at the heart of which is the divinity of Jesus Christ.

One of the distinguishing features of the *Gospel of St John* is its presentation of the divinity of Jesus Christ and of the claims of Jesus Christ to be divine. I suspect that one of the purposes of John's writing of his Gospel was to give a more fulsome emphasis to this central doctrine as present in the other three (synoptic) Gospels. There are two defining features of the Christian religion that mark it off from Judaism. The first is that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and the second is far more notable: that Jesus the Messiah is the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father. If a Christian begins to doubt this – as did Blanco White – he is on the path to the abandonment of Christianity. That Jesus Christ claimed to be the Son of God is manifest in the Gospel of St John, and our passage today is one of the several that could be cited to show this. We read that "*The Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me? We are not stoning you for any of these, replied the Jews, but for blasphemy, because you, a man, claim to be God.*" One of the distinctive features of the religion of the Hebrews was the prophetic

tradition. It was a religion of divinely-authenticated prophets. Several had been called by God to speak on his behalf, and they claimed to be *prophets*. They knew they had been called by God to speak his word to the people, and they denounced false prophets in the process. Our Lord in his preaching referred often to the prophets before him – and to the false prophets, too. When our Lord appeared on the scene – after receiving the formal backing of John the Baptist – he was counted a prophet by the people. *A great prophet has risen among us*, they said, even one of the old prophets brought back to life. But Jesus Christ did not claim to be just one more prophet. His claim was utterly unique. He claimed to be God's very own Son. This was meant in a special sense, and the leaders understood it immediately. He was God's Son in the sense that he was divine. He was equal to God. It was for this that he died.

Let us never get used to the thought that the man Jesus Christ is God. The Christian religion is therefore like no other. Who is God? God is Jesus Christ – and he is the Father, and he is the Holy

Spirit. So we adore and love Jesus Christ as the centre and heart of man's religion. For this reason the vocation of man is to know, love and serve Jesus Christ with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and in him to love and serve our neighbour. This is what the Christian religion entails. Let us then strive every day to be true Christians!



Saturday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 22 (21): 20, 7 O Lord, do not stay afar off; my strength, make haste to help me! For I am a worm and no man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

Collect O God, who have made all those reborn in Christ a chosen race and a royal priesthood, grant us, we pray, the grace to will and to do what you command, that the people called to eternal life may be one in the faith of their hearts and the homage of their deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 37:21-28; (Psalm) Jeremiah 31;
John 11:45-56

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. What are we

accomplishing? they asked. Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish. He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life. Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples. When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked one another, What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all? (John 11:45-56)

Trust in God It is interesting to notice that in the Gospel of St John we are given detailed reports of the discussions about Jesus within the meetings of the Sanhedrin, including his trial. We also know the details of the discussion between Pilate and the priests. It suggests that the author of the Gospel had some special access to the Sanhedrin and ready contacts with the members of it. Putting it all together, some scholars opine that John the Evangelist's family – Zebedee of Galilee being John's father – was a priestly family. Be that as it may, in John's account today the Sanhedrin, gathered in session, is shown as profoundly perplexed as to how to dominate the Person of Jesus and his ministry. *"What are we accomplishing? they asked. Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."* Their fear of the action of the Romans was a pretext they hypocritically used to justify their angry discomfort. That there was no basis for this was shown later in Pilate's own lack of concern about Jesus being seditious when Jesus was questioned by him. But then we have the words of Caiaphas, serving as

high priest that year, who rises to put the confusion of the Sanhedrin to an end. He purports to resolve their moral dilemma with this principle: *"You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."* It was utilitarianism at its worst, doing away with the prophet for the benefit of avoiding a supposed catastrophic intervention by the Romans. But then the inspired author makes the profound point that God was the Master of history, and Caiaphas, unworthy though he was, was speaking prophetically. He did not know it, but the very principle he was setting forth would be marvellously vindicated in the event. It was indeed better that Jesus Christ die for the nation and for all of God's children everywhere and in every time. Had Christ not died for our sins, the upshot for us would be death, for the wages of sin are death.

The words of Caiaphas and John's comment on them are a powerful reminder of the might of God's providence. God bestows on man his gift of freedom. He can choose good or evil, and terrible evils have been perpetrated in the world as a result of man's free choice. Sin

and crime have proliferated from the beginning, and yet the Creator of all attains his ends. Good is drawn out of evil and that good is far greater than the evil from which it was drawn. An archetypal instance of this is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and it ought provide hope and inspiration for all who are burdened with the mystery of suffering and evil. If any question were justified, it would surely have been (at the time) the perennial one. Why did God allow this to happen to Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in word and deed, whom many had hoped would bring to Israel their liberation? Why did he himself allow this to happen to him, when he had shown time and again that he could elude the machinations of his enemies? But it was not to be. The prince of this world was on his way, and the net, ever encircling, suddenly entrapped the prey. Christ was apprehended, hastily condemned and put to a shocking death. There he lay, noble beyond description in his terrible death, the expression of a king on his incomparable though lifeless face. It was a sudden and terrible end and it seemed that God had been defeated. But ah! No! God was Master of history, and to Satan's chagrin all had been according to the divine

plan. *It had been better for the people that the Messiah and Son die, than that the people perish.* It was necessary that the Son of Man suffer and die in order to enter into his glory, and take with him all of God's children. The supposed breakthrough offered by Caiaphas to the confused and duplicitous Sanhedrin was indeed mankind's breakthrough, but in a sense transcending all that the corrupt high priest had supposed. Without the death of Christ, men would have died without any hope of eternal life. The mighty providence of God had drawn unparalleled good out of unparalleled evil.

Let us in all our difficulties and disappointments, all our perplexities at the seeming futility of life's efforts, gaze on the figure of the Crucified One. Let us but resolve to do God's will as it seems to present itself before us, and trust in the power and wisdom of God. He has a reason, a very good reason, for permitting whatever he does. We must do our best for what is good – as did Jesus Christ – and then trust in the providence of God. On the tomb of Mary MacKillop in Sydney

is that holy woman's advice: *Trust in God!* That is what we must do, in everything.

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

First Form: The Procession

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt. 21:9 Hosanna to the Son of David, the King of Israel. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest

Second Form: The Solemn Entrance (Entrance Antiphon as above)

Third Form: The Simple Entrance

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Jn 12: 1, 12-13; Ps 24 (23): 9-10 Six days before the Passover, when the Lord came into the city of Jerusalem, the children ran to meet him; in their hands they carried palm branches and with a loud voice cried out: *Hosanna in the highest! Blessed are you, who have come in your abundant mercy! O gates, lift high your heads;

grow higher, ancient doors. Let him enter, the king of glory! Who is this king of glory? He, the Lord of hosts, he is the king of glory. *Hosanna in the highest! Blessed are you, who have come in your abundant mercy!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who as an example of humility for the human race to follow caused our Saviour to take flesh and submit to the Cross, graciously grant that we may heed his lesson of patient suffering and so merit a share in his Resurrection. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 50:4 7; Psalm 21;
Philippians 2:6 11; Luke 22:14 23:56

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which

no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.' Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, Why are you untying the colt? They replied, The Lord needs it. They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest! Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, Teacher, rebuke your disciples! I tell you, he replied, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out. (Luke 19:28-40)

The Work of Works There are those who consider the wars flowing from the French Revolution and the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte as being the first world/continental war – and this was over a century prior to World War I. In a sense it became a war between Bonaparte and his

principal enemy, the British. Napoleon came to see that because of the mastery of the sea by the British, it would be impossible for him to invade England. So he launched a continental blockade which attempted to destroy Britain's ability to trade. The whole of the European continent, including even Russia, was to be shut off from English goods. It involved immense effort, was never fully implemented, went on for nearly eight years, and broke down at the seams. England's response to it seriously affected its relations with the United States – and this was but some twenty-five years since the revolt of thirteen of the North American colonies of Great Britain who declared themselves independent in 1776 as the United States of America. France had signed an alliance with the new United States in 1778, which escalated the conflict into a war between Britain and France, Spain, and the Netherlands. On the other hand, the continental blockade facilitated Wellington's entry into Europe via the rebellious Spanish Peninsular, and this contributed greatly to Bonaparte's final defeat. Ultimately it caused more harm to the Bonaparte's Grand Empire than to England. I mention this as one example of so many

spectacular projects in the history of mankind. Kingdoms and rulers have risen and fallen; lives have been lost; blood, sweat and tears have been expended, and one might be forgiven for wondering, all to what avail? George Bernard Shaw once publicly joked that it would have been better for mankind if Napoleon had never been born. Let that be the backdrop, and let the scene of history now change to the One portrayed in our Gospel passage today. It occurred on the outskirts of the Roman Empire, at the gates of Jerusalem. A man was proceeding on a colt, humbly, with no pretensions in his regal face. He was no political ruler, no holder of great power. There he slowly rode with crowds surrounding him, front and behind. They were acclaiming him as the promised Messiah who had come. A man in his prime, his face exuded holiness and an immense indefinable dignity. His eyes gazed ahead of him to the holy city which would be the scene of a unique drama affecting all of history to come.

Let us imagine all the projects of the world and the efforts that they have been expended by man – and I referred to but one of them

above. What would any of these, or all of them together, amount to when compared with the project which this Man now entering Jerusalem had set himself? He had set himself the task, and had been sent from above for the purpose, of atoning for the sin of the world. He was about to bare his shoulders to assume the effect in suffering of all the sins of mankind. Can anyone think of a more mammoth task? Consider the sins of one solitary individual, even an unusual individual blessed with never having committed a *mortal* sin of either thought, word or deed. Consider such a man's numerous, nay countless, *venial* offences against God. *Even if* all of mankind were never to have committed a *mortal* sin, consider the unending sea of *venial* sins perpetrated daily by mankind, sins of the heart, sins of the mind, sins of the tongue, sins of deed. Imagine being burdened with the *venial sins* of all mankind. But in fact we must imagine the sin of the world as involving *mortal sin*. From the very dawn of history *mortal sin* has appeared on the scene, dark, hateful, rebellious, deadly. Our first parents sinned mortally, wishing *to be gods* in independence of the one God. If you eat of this tree you will be like God, knowing (i.e.,

determining for yourself) good and evil. That was the temptation, and they chose it. It reflected the sin of the demons long before. Ever since this terrible beginning at the dawn of human history, sin has abounded in the world, and it has been mortal sin as well as venial sin. The problem of the world has been sin. Sin entered the world through one man and with sin came death, and death has spread to the whole human race. The problem the Messiah had been sent to fix was man's separation from God. There he was, now entering Jerusalem, and by the end of that week the work would be done. It was achieved not by armies nor chariots, not by trumpets, not by the fanfare of the great, but by his own absolute obedience to the Father amid unparalleled personal suffering.

The greatest thing ever done for man and the world was done by Jesus Christ. It entailed simple steps: witnessing to the truth of his Person and teaching, and accepting the will of his heavenly Father that he suffer indescribably for the sin of the world as a result. He carried his cross from Pilate's building across to the raised rock outside the city

and there was crucified. It was an occurrence that veiled a profound cosmic shift, a shift from bondage to sin to a share in the life of God. If we, nobodies though we might be, follow in the footsteps of Jesus, then we shall also contribute mightily to the good of man. Let us get our priorities right, then! Ah yes, to the work!

A Second Reflection: (Luke 19:28-40)

"As he was approaching the downward slope of the Mount of Olives, the whole group of disciples joyfully began to praise God at the top of their voices for all the miracles they had seen". (Luke 19:28-40)

Suffering with Christ I remember watching a television interview with a prominent Australian philosopher who was asked if he believed in God. He said he did not because of all the evil and suffering there is in the world. If there *were* a God, he said, he would have arranged

things *differently*. It was not clear whether that philosopher (Peter Singer) was asking for a world free of evil and suffering, but the good news is that God has sent his Son to deal with evil and suffering, and by uniting ourselves with Jesus, we too deal with it – in God's way – in our own lives. On Palm Sunday we celebrate our Lord entering Jerusalem for the holiest week of his life, the week during which he would deal definitively with suffering and sin. In the first reading we read of the suffering Servant of Yahweh, the harbinger of Christ in meekly submitting to the violence inflicted upon him. He dealt with sin by accepting – indeed embracing – and then bearing to the end, the suffering which came to him as a result of his witnessing to the truth. Our Lord dreaded his hour of suffering, and in the Garden he sweated blood at the prospect. But at the same time he looked to it with longing, setting his face towards it like flint. He advanced towards it with firm decision for he intended to give it its new meaning. By means of his suffering he would take away the sin of the world.

St Paul writes that God made the sinless Christ to be sin, as it were, in order to take away our sins. Now, there is another aspect of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. It is that he entered Jerusalem to bear witness to the truth about his own Person before the leaders of the Jews and before Pilate, which is to say before the chosen people and before the world. Before the chief priests he testified that he was the Son of the Most High, that he would be seated at his right hand, and therefore that he was equal to God. Before Pilate he said that he was born to bear witness to the truth, and in his passion he bore witness to this truth. We are called to share in his work of bearing witness to the truth about Jesus. The word *martyr* means witness, and martyrs are referred to as receiving the palm of martyrdom. On Palm Sunday we all receive palms above all to symbolize our resolve to bear witness to our faith in Jesus our king. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Let us resolve to bear witness to Jesus every day in every aspect of our lives, in all our thoughts, words, joys and sufferings. For if we are not ashamed of bearing witness to Jesus here on earth he will bear witness to us before our Father in heaven. Christ has shown that the suffering

in the world is now the path to glory. Christ humbled himself to share our nature even to death, and because of his obedience God raised him on high.

Let us take that path. If we unite our sufferings with those of Christ in a spirit of obedience and in witness to him who is the truth, those sufferings will lead us to glory. They will sanctify us. This is the grace to seek this week and today, uniting ourselves in spirit with Jesus as he enters Jerusalem to suffer for us.

A Third Reflection: (Luke 19:28-40)

"As he was approaching the downward slope of the Mount of Olives, the whole group of disciples joyfully began to praise God at the top of their voices for all the miracles they had seen" (Luke 19:28-40).

Suffering

Today we think of our Lord entering Jerusalem to undergo unimaginable sufferings for the salvation of the world. Due to our Lord's sufferings, human suffering has a redemptive and sanctifying *purpose*, and this sense of that *purpose* we have to recover. Suffering takes many forms. For instance, it can take the form of failure. If one were to ask, from a worldly point of view, whether Christ at the time of his death was a success or a failure, what would some have said? They would have said – especially the religious leaders – that he was a failure. The people *en masse* did not really believe in him, and in fact the leaders killed him. His own closest associates ran away. In fact, if there is one person in history who presents the problem of evil and suffering, it is Jesus Christ. The ancient Greeks were, largely, fatalists. Even their gods were depicted as being in the hands of *fate*. Christ revealed a divine *purpose* in everything. In our day what is the reaction to suffering? It is to do anything, even the grossest evil, to avoid it. We even kill the unborn to avoid suffering. I suppose there are two main reasons why an abortion is proposed. One is the difficulty and inconvenience for the *parent* in the pregnancy, birth and upbringing

of the child. A second reason is often that, due to scientific techniques, it is discovered that the *child* will have serious disabilities. The *child*, it is said, would have no quality of life and the quality of life for the *mother* too will be seriously impaired. There will be too much *suffering* and inconvenience. Suffering is deemed to have *no purpose*, and the response to it is to do anything to avoid it, even to put an end to the life in question.

Once on the ABC TV 7.30 Report presenter Kerry O'Brien interviewed the scientist who many years ago discovered DNA, the genetic material that determines the character traits and constitution of the unborn child. Because of this discovery all sorts of genetic information is now available, enabling the parents to know what will be the physical health and constitution of the child. With this knowledge many decide to abort children with very serious disabilities. The scientist who discovered DNA unambiguously stated that the *unborn* child has no rights as such, and that if it is discovered that the child will have serious disabilities, it is up to the parent to decide whether the

child should live or not. That was his response to suffering. Suffering has *no purpose* at all. Immediately after that segment, Kerry O'Brien introduced another segment which showed a seriously disabled woman in her wheelchair. She was shown deriving great joy from her work of painting. Then it was explained that her disease progressively makes her a complete prisoner in her own body, and will probably eventually kill her. But she radiated happiness and joy. Moreover, she had formed a group of young women friends who had established a foundation to raise funds for research into the disease she was suffering from. They had already raised \$200,000 for this purpose, and had brought out a scientist to Australia to begin the research. One of the group explained that even if this woman dies from the disease without the cure, the research will go on. But most impressive of all was the happiness, the vitality and the joy of this disabled woman. Significantly, she said that she was convinced that her disability was given to her *for a reason*. Her suffering had and would have a *purpose*.

That woman was living proof from her joyful attitude that life was indeed worth living despite her deadly disability. Further, she was establishing a foundation to find a cure for the disability from which she herself was suffering. She was bringing quality of life to others. When the cross comes, we must resolve to believe that all is in the hands of God and that he is allowing this, or even sending it, as a sign of his love. We must try to thank him for the good things as well as the bad, knowing that he gives and he takes away for our best interests. We must trust him, and unite ourselves to the Cross of Christ, asking Jesus to use our sufferings just as the Father used his to redeem the world.



Monday of Holy Week

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 35 (34): 1-2; 140 (139): 8 Contend, O Lord, with my contenders; fight those who fight me. Take up your buckler and shield; arise in my defence, Lord, my mighty help.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, though in our weakness we fail, we may be revived through the Passion of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 42: 1-7; Psalm 26; John 12: 1-11

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to

betray him, objected, Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages. He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. Leave her alone, Jesus replied. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me. Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. (John 12:1-11)

Religion Before he fled Tibet for India, the young Dalai Lama met Mao Tse Tung in Beijing. Mao told him plainly that he had no belief in religion and that religion was a nonsense. Mao had embraced atheistic Marxism, which had come out of the West. He had no time for religion – like his counterparts in Russia at the time. Religion was a wholly

negative phenomenon and harmful to the true interests of man, those interests being material. Man's true home was here in this life, and religion took man's eyes right off the ball to a pie in the sky, an opiate that took away his incentive to better his conditions of life. However, that is not the only attitude to religion on the part of those who are not religious as such. There are irreligious governments that recognize the practical benefits of religion for society. As far as they are concerned, religion keeps the people law-abiding and submissive, and it fosters charitable works. When Napoleon Bonaparte, having gained absolute power in France after the decade or more of chaos following the outbreak of the Revolution, decided to restore the Old Religion, he did it for very practical purposes. He established a concordat with the Holy See (which he soon disregarded) in order to regulate French life. He wanted an orderly and contented nation. He himself was a man of the Enlightenment and saw the religion of the Church as useful to himself and to the state. So he re-established it to a degree, and channelled its activities to suit his purposes. Now, his attitude is very typical of much of Western secular culture. The West does not suppress religion, of

course, for it prizes democracy. It supports and defends religion as one of the rights of man, and as being beneficial to man. As far as modern secular man is concerned, at root religion may be a delusion but it is useful. So it is that if it is known that in, say, Communist China, religion is strictly controlled and even suppressed, the West does not become too convulsed because, after all, religion is, at most, useful. Other things are essential – such as a vibrant economy.

In our Gospel today a beautiful action was taken, which in the mind of Judas Iscariot, was *not* very useful. We read that in the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus a dinner was given in honour of our Lord, following his raising of Lazarus from the dead. *"Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume."* Imagine the scene. There is another scene in the Gospels of our Lord visiting the home of Martha and Mary. Martha is doing the serving, and Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to his word. It is a wondrous thought that God made

man was seated in that home, and that Mary was seated before him absorbed in his words. She was before the living God, gazing on him, listening to him as he spoke to her. In its way, it is thrilling. Here in our Gospel scene today, Martha is again doing the serving – she who professed such a magnificent faith in our Lord just before he raised her brother so spectacularly from the dead – and Mary is once again at the feet of Jesus. In our Gospel scene today Mary brings not just herself, but "*a pint of pure nard*." Perhaps this was kept as the oil of burial for all three of them, Martha, Mary and Lazarus, and even others of the wider family besides – we cannot tell. Its great value is indicated by the grudging words of Judas whose heart was clearly leaving Jesus Christ. The *nard* was worth the best part of a year's salary, and was about to be poured out in one moment. Let us imagine Mary quickly entering with her container, and full of love and veneration she stood at the feet of Jesus as he reclined at the feast. We may presume that Martha and Lazarus were aware of what she was about to do and fully concurred. As she poured out the precious nard and wiped our Lord's feet with her hair, the whole house was filled with the action. It was a

magnificent gesture of worship, and an image of true religion. Religion is not just a matter of utility. Religion is the offering to God of our love and adoration. Her gesture was solemnly approved by Christ.

Let us understand that the highest thing we can do in life is the kind of thing that Mary did on this occasion. Every day on rising, let us immediately offer our whole selves to God and Christ, and make the rest of the day like the pure nard that Mary poured out on the feet of Jesus Christ. As she poured and then wiped his feet with her hair, so by the offering of our minds and hearts, we direct the prayers, works, joys and sufferings of each day to God. All of this is caught up in Christ every time we participate in Mass. Let us make true religion the heart and soul of our life.



Tuesday of Holy Week

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26): 12 Do not leave me to the will of my foes, O Lord, for false witnesses rise up against me and they breathe out violence.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, grant us so to celebrate the mysteries of the Lord's Passion that we may merit to receive your pardon. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 49: 1-6; Psalm 70; John 13: 21-33.36-38

After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me. His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, Ask him which one he means. Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, Lord, who is it? Jesus answered, It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread

when I have dipped it in the dish. Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. What you are about to do, do quickly, Jesus told him, but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night. When he was gone, Jesus said, Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. Simon Peter asked him, Lord, where are you going? Jesus replied, Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later. Peter asked, Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you. Then Jesus answered, Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times! (John 13: 21-33.36-38)

The Gaze of Christ On March 15 (the Ides of March), 44 BC, Julius Caesar was assassinated by some Roman senators, including Marcus Junius Brutus, Caesar's close friend. Caesar's last words are not known with certainty. Those most famously attributed to him are "*Et tu, Brute?*", placed in his mouth by Shakespeare in his drama, *Julius Caesar*. Some understand Caesar's final words as expressing shock at his betrayal, others see in them a curse and a threat. In any case, the great Caesar knew nothing of the conspiracy and, surprised at the last, went to his death at the hands of a friend. The words, "*Et tu, Brute?*" have come to signify betrayal by a friend. A little less than seventy years after Caesar, there was a far more heinous betrayal in a corner of the Empire. In the Garden of Gethsemane, our Lord addressed his betrayer as his friend. "*Friend,*" he said to Judas, "*would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?*" Our Lord had personally chosen Judas from among his disciples to be one of the Twelve, a patriarch of his Church, to be with him as his special companion and to be sent out with a special share in his mission. It was an extraordinary vocation to friendship with Christ, a unique choice, and Judas could have been a

great saint like the rest of the Twelve. As such he would have been celebrated with his own feast day in the life of the Church till the end of time. He could have died a martyr for Christ and reigned forever with Christ in heaven. Now, what do we notice? In chapter six of St John's Gospel, after our Lord made his stunning announcement of the doctrine of the Eucharist in the Synagogue of Capernaum, many of his disciples left him. Turning to the Twelve, he asked if they too were intending to go, for there was no turning back from what he had just revealed. No indeed, Simon Peter answered, for he, Jesus, had the words of life. "*Have I not chosen you Twelve?*" our Lord replied. "*Yet one of you is a devil.*" Caesar knew nothing of his betrayal, but our Lord knew his betrayer exactly.

Our Gospel today (John 13: 21-33.36-38) opens with our Lord's expression of heartfelt disappointment, which undoubtedly was an oblique appeal to the soul of his chosen companion. "*Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me.*" An absorbing feature of this scene is that the entire body

of disciples had not the slightest suspicion of the apostasy of the heart of Judas. They had no idea that one among them had given up on Jesus, let alone had entered into traitorous relations with his very enemies. Judas had been with them for the best part of three years, living with them, going out on missions with them, associating with our Lord freely and constantly. It must have been a community life of the first order with our Lord as its heart and soul. If there is one good way of getting to know a person, live with him. They lived with Judas, and yet over this period of constant association they suspected nothing. They would have known some of his faults just as they would have known various of the faults of one another. But nothing of seriousness was suspected. We read that when our Lord made his startling announcement, *"His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, Ask him which one he means. Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, Lord, who is it?"* Simon Peter had no idea, nor did John the beloved disciple. Our Lord had associated Peter, James and John with

him in special ways, but nothing whatever was divulged to them. The complete disaffection by Judas was one of Christ's most serious burdens. Judas attempted to disguise himself even from Christ. But his heart was in full view to our Lord's loving and sorrowful gaze. Our Lord did not unmask him, nor expel him, nor take him to task. Undoubtedly, by all sorts of discreet ways our Lord attempted to shield and dissuade him from the approaches of Satan. But Satan won, and at the Last Supper, entered him.

The story of Judas is, among other things, the story of a heart that sank more and more into the swamp of serious sin, but which was constantly open to the gaze of Jesus Christ. Let us think of that divine gaze. No one, not even Satan, can plumb the depths of our hearts and see what is happening at bottom. Not even do we see to the very depths. But one assuredly does, and he is our brother and our God, Jesus Christ. He knows our heart through and through, and its very first starting points are in full view to him. Let us ask him to give us a heart which right to the very foundation is good soil for the word of God, a

heart that will produce a harvest with the aid of God's grace. In a word, let us live before the gaze of Jesus Christ, always trying to please him.

Wednesday of Holy Week

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Phil 2: 10, 8, 11 At the name of Jesus, every knee should bend of those in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, for the Lord became obedient to death, death on a cross: therefore Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Collect O God, who willed your Son to submit for our sake to the yoke of the Cross, so that you might drive from us the power of the enemy, grant us, your servants, to attain the grace of the resurrection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 68; Matthew 26:14-25

One of the Twelve- the one called Judas Iscariot- went to the chief priests and asked, What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you? So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over. On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover? He replied, Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.' So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me. They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, Surely not I, Lord? Jesus replied, The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born. Then Judas, the one

who would betray him, said, Surely not I, Rabbi? Jesus answered, Yes, it is you. (Matthew 26: 14-25)

Secret Sin In their accounts of the Last Supper, each of the four Gospels narrates how our Lord sorrowfully announced that one of his own would betray him. They all agree that Judas was there in their midst during this dramatic announcement that astonished the body of the disciples. Now, there is a textual detail that suggests how memorable this was in the minds of the disciples. Our Gospel passage today is Matthew's account of this declaration of Jesus, which occurs early in the Supper (26: 20-21). In Matthew, our Lord's words are (in the Greek) "*eis ex humôn paradôsei me*" (one of you will betray me). In John's account of the Supper, Christ tells the news after he has washed the feet of his disciples, which would have included Judas. The words as quoted by John (13: 21) are the same, "*eis ex humôn paradôsei me*." In the Gospel of St Mark, which scholars generally agree is Mark's writing of Peter's account of the Gospel, the wording is the same: "*eis ex humôn paradôsei me*" (14: 18) with the addition of "*ho*

esthiôn met' emou" (the one eating with me). That is to say, we have identical versions of the very words of Christ in the recollections of three of the Apostles who were at the Supper. With all three, the Greek rendering of the original Aramaic (or Hebrew) is the same. John and Peter were on either side of our Lord, and perhaps Matthew was reclining not far from them at the repast. Luke, who was not at the Supper and who reports the result of his careful enquiries, has our Lord say this: "behold, the hand of my betrayer is with me at the table" (22: 21). He, not an eye-witness, differs in wording from the other three, although our Lord may have said what Luke reports as well. The point I am making here is that it looks as if our Lord's devastating news was so memorable that the very words he used burned into the minds of those who were present. It was overwhelming and there had been no preparation for it. They had not the slightest inkling that such a thing would come to pass. The Apostles were in complete confusion, and all the while Judas kept his terrible secret. He was buried in secret, mortal sin – hidden, as he hoped, even from the knowledge of Christ.

Yes, Judas in his heart of hearts was profoundly isolated, and this is how he wanted it to be. He studiously fitted in with the others. They had no suspicion of where he stood. In our Gospel passage today from Matthew (Matthew 26: 14-25), various ones of the Apostles in turn asked our Lord if it were they who would betray him – presumably they meant inadvertently, or in some other inexplicable manner. Matthew reports that Judas also asked our Lord the same question – and perhaps Matthew remembered seeing Judas ask this. This fact immediately suggests that, apart from fitting in very well in the Apostolic group, even in his expressions of friendship towards our Lord Judas had seemed no different from the others. The point is that Judas was sunk in hidden sin. His descent from venial to mortal sin had been a solitary and hidden process, in which in his heart he had gradually striven to hide himself from the Saviour. We remember the first man and woman who, after they had sinned, hid from the Lord God who was walking in the Garden. Judas became clouded in self-deception, thinking that what he was doing was "okay" after all. He had approached the chief priests, and perhaps his dark and

terrible dealings with them gave legitimacy to his course, in his own mind. Satan was befuddling him in self-deceit and, at each step, Judas deliberately chose his course. All of this was luminously clear to the all-knowing Christ. He could see the advancing tragedy of his chosen friend – his *friend*! He would address him as such in the Garden: *Friend, do you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?* In our passage today, Judas thinks that Christ knows nothing of the direction of his heart and of his relations with his mortal enemies. He is seated near enough to our Lord, because in John's Gospel our Lord reaches to him, offering the gift of a morsel. Hiding himself from the gaze of Goodness itself, he asks, Surely not I, Rabbi? Our Lord whispered plainly to him that, yes, it was he indeed. The tragedy of Judas was that *he was not open with our Lord*. Had he only admitted to our Lord his temptations and his secret falls!

The immortal story of Judas Iscariot surely tells us that we must bring our temptations and our sins before Jesus Christ for his light, his grace, his pardon and his direction. We must develop a hatred of

hidden, secret sins. We must examine our consciences, and bring all sins to the light of the divine gaze, asking Jesus our Redeemer for his grace, his light and his pardon. Judas needed the spiritual direction of Jesus Christ, and he refused it. He needed his pardon, and he refused it. He went down the path of Satan, and reached a point where all he then did was despair. Let this be the lesson of lessons. Flee all secret sin! Bring all sin before Jesus Christ!



Easter Triduum



Thursday of the Lord's Supper

At the Evening Mass

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Gal 6: 14 We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered.

Collect O God, who have called us to participate in this most sacred Supper, in which your Only Begotten Son, when about to hand himself over to death, entrusted to the Church a sacrifice new for all eternity, the banquet of his love, grant, we pray, that we may draw from so great a mystery, the fullness of charity and of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 12:1-8.11-14; Psalm 115;
1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13: 1-15

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, Lord, are you going to wash my feet? Jesus replied, You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand. No, said Peter, you shall never wash my feet. Jesus answered, Unless I wash you, you have no part with me. Then, Lord, Simon Peter replied, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well! Jesus answered, A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you. For he knew who was going to betray

him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. Do you understand what I have done for you? he asked them. You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John 13: 1-15)

The Divine Servant In ancient civilizations where sandals were the footwear and dust and dirt a feature of roads, a host commonly offered to provide water for a guest to wash his feet. An example of this is given us when Abraham received the three men by the terebinth of Mamre (Genesis 18:4). Alternatively, a servant might wash the feet of the guest, and we read in 1 Samuel 25: 41 how Abigail, referring to herself as David's "handmaid," says she "would become a slave to wash the feet of my Lord's servants." On one occasion our Lord accepted the invitation of a Pharisee to dine with him. The Pharisee omitted the courtesy of offering our Lord water to wash his feet, but during the

meal a woman entered the house – a woman with a poor reputation in the town – and proceeded to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. She then anointed his *feet* with her perfumed oil. She was showing him signal love and honour. Our Lord accepted her courtesy and sent her away with her sins forgiven. We remember how after our Lord raised Lazarus from the dead, a dinner was held in his honour in the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. When all were reclining at table, Mary came in with a pint of pure nard to the value of nearly a year's wages, and poured it over the *feet* of Jesus. She was, as a host, washing the feet of Jesus not just with water but with a most valuable substance. The aroma filled the entire house, as she wiped the feet of Jesus not just with a towel, but with her hair. By her hair, she was, as it were, taking the place of the towel that wiped his feet. She was humbly bestowing the highest honour on our Lord that was within her power, and which fitted in with custom. The gesture of washing the feet was a mark of genuine humility by the host and of high honour to the guest. In our Gospel today, our Lord, whom the disciples addressed as Master and Lord – and "rightly so, for that is what I am" – knelt

before each of his disciples and proceeded to *wash their feet*. It symbolized Christ being a servant to them. It was too much for Simon Peter. "Lord, you shall never wash my feet," he said.

Ponder the scene (John 13: 1-15), and contemplate what it tells us of the one and only God. It is extraordinary enough, wondrous beyond words, that God is in the midst of this group as a Man. This Man whom they addressed as Master and Lord, with whom Peter felt he could expostulate, was the living God, the God of all things visible and invisible. Through him all things were made, and in him was life, the source of life for all living things. There he stood, there he sat, there he conversed, in his humanity. The great God, so high a God as to transcend all things in every respect, had taken to himself a human nature and thus made himself our brother. But lo! He rises from the table and "*wrapped a towel round his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him.*" The gesture was unmistakable in its significance. God was acting as a humble servant

would act towards an honoured guest. That is the attitude of God towards the living work of his hands. The highest and most exalted Reality of all, is humble and loving. This, Being at its most exalted, is humble and serving. Our Lord was revealing to his disciples what it is to be like God. Simon Peter refused, for it was, he thought, demeaning to the One whom he so loved and venerated. He could not accept that his very feet be washed by his Master and his Lord. But he had to accept it, if Jesus was to be his Master and Lord at all, for Jesus the Master was the predicted Suffering Servant who would take away the sins of mankind. *"Unless I wash you, you have no part with me. Then, Lord, Simon Peter replied, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well! Jesus answered, A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean."* Our Lord had come to wash the feet of mankind, making himself the Servant of all men, making them clean all over. That was his grand mission, to make humanity clean of sin and endowed with a share in his own life. His disciples, with Simon Peter at their head, would have the mission of bringing Jesus Christ to the world so that in him the world would be made new.

Let us understand well what it means to be like God. It means to be like Jesus Christ who put aside the divine glory that had been his to become as men are, and humbler still, even to death on a cross. He became the Servant of all, and his final gesture at the Last Supper, washing the feet of his disciples – and just imagine our Lord's emotion as he washed the feet of Judas Iscariot – showed forth who he really was and what he had come to do. He was the God of all love, and he had come to make mankind clean. Let us take our stand with him and strive to do as he did.



Friday of the Passion of the Lord [GOOD FRIDAY]

Prayer Remember your mercies, O Lord, and with your eternal protection sanctify your servants, for whom Christ your Son, by the shedding of his Blood, established the Paschal Mystery. Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, who by the Passion of Christ your Son, our Lord, abolished the death inherited from ancient sin by every succeeding generation, grant that just as, being conformed to him, we have borne by the law of nature the image of the man of earth, so by the sanctification of grace we may bear the image of the Man of heaven. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture today: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9;
John 18:1-19:42

Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your king?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, and, carrying the cross himself, he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew, Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus in the middle. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews." Now many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that he said, 'I am the King of the Jews'." Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written." (John 19:15-22)

The King Crucifixion was in use among the Persians, Seleucids, Carthaginians, and Romans from about the 6th century BC to the 4th century AD. Alexander the Great is reputed to have crucified 2000 survivors from his siege of the Phoenician city of Tyre. Can we

imagine what might have happened to the course of history had *Alexander* been captured during one of his numerous battles, and subsequently crucified? The thought of Alexander the Great being crucified almost boggles the historical imagination because of his greatness as a general. His potential greatness would have immediately come to nothing. Let us take a second hypothesis. Julius Caesar was captured on two occasions by pirates, and on the second occasion his captors were the feared Cilicians. Exercising (while in captivity) his calm bravado, he was subsequently released on a ransom. He then returned, defeated and captured them, and proceeded to *crucify* them. Imagine if the pirates had crucified Caesar instead, while he was their captive? Not only would it have been the abrupt end of a most distinguished career, but it would have been one of history's most resounding humiliations. Alexander the Great, and then Julius Caesar, both crucified by their enemies! – the thought is almost preposterous. In our Gospel passage today we have the cold, hard fact of the Lord of lords and King of kings being led out of the Holy City of Jerusalem to the Rock called the Skull. He carried on his shoulders the

beam to which he would be nailed. So weak was he that at one point a passer-by was commandeered to carry the wood by his side to the place of crucifixion. There he was crucified between two other criminals. A sign was nailed to the head of the cross, written in the three languages of that part of the world – Latin, Greek and Hebrew, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." It was death in disgrace, a total rejection, and at that point it seemed to be the utter end of everything. But no. It is perhaps the most amazing phenomenon in history and in religion that this Crucified One would within a few *days* be acknowledged by his followers as the Lord of lords, and King of kings. Alexander and Caesar, for all their earthly glory, were reduced to but dust and ashes, and who is to say where they are now, on the other side of the grave? Not so, Jesus the Crucified One.

Let us place ourselves in that forlorn scene outside the City. We stand with a small and heartbroken group. His holy, strong and all-suffering mother, his beloved disciple, and a few other ardent disciples among the women, all are watching. The stark and bare rock

stands before us as we hear the thud of the nails and the wood being hoisted to its position. Alexander, Caesar, and so many others of history had their moments of victory and greatness. Far the greatest of them all is before us now, hanging on the Cross. He is plunged in unheard-of suffering and disgrace. He is engaged in the most decisive of all battles, one on which the prospects of the whole world hangs. He is struggling with titanic forces, for all of hell is beating down upon him, and all of this world's sin. From within the jeers of the religious leaders who see their supposed rival sinking to a terrible death, is heard the laughter of Satan doing all he can to drown Christ in suffering. The Messiah is being done to death. As this most admirable of men – whom the very centurion would soon call a son of God – descended into the darkest depths, a great light was appearing within the gloom of the world's sin. The field was being won, and the sword of the victory was obedience amid humiliation and suffering. Mankind's champion was making up for all the sins of mankind. There he stood in the middle of the field, as it were, as the storm bellowed above. Opening wide his powerful arms he asked his loving Father that the sin of the world strike

him instead. That it did, and like a powerful bolt of lightning the sin of the world struck him with a force that cannot be measured. It hit him and he received its force with a full and loving heart, and with that, the lightning was spent. It had done its work in putting to death the Messiah, so that all of his brothers might live now and forever. The Messiah lay dead, having promised that very soon, indeed on the third day, he would rise again with a new life that he would share with us all. He expiated for the sin of the world, the greatest of victories.

Let us all our lives contemplate the King of kings and Lord of lords hanging on the Cross. In that great event the world was saved, and man was given the lesson of all lessons. If we want to know the secret to being victorious in life, we must look not to the Alexanders and to the Caesars, but to one man, Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews and the Lord of the world. Let us aim in life to know, love and serve Jesus Christ our Lord and God, and in this way come to see and enjoy him forever in heaven. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the image of the unseen God, the only way to the Father, the only name by

which man can be saved. His throne is the Cross. Let us take our stand with him on Calvary, in front of this one and only throne.



Holy Saturday Morning

Scripture today: For Holy Saturday morning, consider John 19:38-42
(the burial of Jesus)

(After Jesus had died) Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was near by, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:38 42)

Christ in Death

This day, the day following the death of Jesus Christ, was the Sabbath, a great day of rest. Christ died on the Friday afternoon, just as the Vigil of the Sabbath was approaching. His body lay in the tomb during the whole of the Sabbath rest and he rose soon after that Sabbath day had ended – in the early hours of the first day of the new week. He died towards the end of the Friday, lay in the tomb during the whole of the Sabbath and rose very early on the third day. In his account, St John tells us that on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene arrived while it was still dark – obviously arriving as soon as she could with the Sabbath Day now over – and the stone was discovered to have been moved aside. Christ had already risen. So it is especially on the Saturday, the Sabbath day of repose, that we celebrate the period in which Jesus Christ remained in death. He had passed to the abode of the dead. It is surely a great mystery, this repose in death of God the Son made man. He shared mankind's descent into the state of death, which of course, as with every other human being did not involve extinction but a passing in his spirit from the scene of this earthly life. In his humanity he continued to live in his spirit but in

what we might call a kind of Limbo, where the other just souls awaited the opening of the gates of heaven. Consider who were there, and who received him. Moses and Elijah had spoken to him when he was transfigured in glory on the Mount not long before his Passion. They would have received him. So would Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the patriarchs, David and those (few) good kings (such as Hezekiah 739 – 686 BC and Josiah 649-609 BC) of the line of David, prophets such as Isaiah and Micah, and others much later such as Simeon and Anna the prophetess who had hailed Christ's arrival as an infant over three decades before. John the Baptist awaited him. So did Anna and Joachim, traditionally considered the parents of Mary. His beloved foster-father Joseph, the husband of his most holy mother, received him. Imagine his meeting with the holy Joseph! He had daily lived and worked with Joseph during all those years at Nazareth. He had been at Joseph's death in their house at Nazareth, and he and his mother had accompanied his body to its burial place outside Nazareth.

There would surely have been others among the just in the abode of the dead, that is, others beyond the pale of the chosen people of God. We read of upright men and women among the peoples. For instance, we may think of those good and conscientious Wise Men from the East who had come to honour the infant King. They had been led by a heavenly star – some form of revelation – from their own culture and wisdom to an encounter with the King of kings. Were they not representative of very many others of various nations whom God in his goodness led in diverse ways along the path of a good life? Surely so. There were those who conscientiously did good work for mankind, even if they failed in this or that respect along the road of moral goodness. Let us think of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle – may we not think of them as having sought the light and in some measure attained it, endeavouring in the process to be virtuous? We cannot tell how God judged them, but we may be sure that God was working for the salvation of all his children, and that in the event he was a God of mercy and compassion. Let us imagine the acclaim and joy that flooded the place of Limbo to which Christ in death descended on that

Sabbath day following his death at Calvary. The field had been won. All that now remained was for him to rise from death and ascend into heaven, and they too would rise with him and ascend to heaven in their spirits. Their Champion had won. The bonds of sin had been broken, and Satan had been left confounded. Imagine Christ in the abode of the dead, among the good and holy souls from God's chosen people and beyond, who by the aid of God had not died in deliberate, unrepented mortal sin. He was there more than a full day – from the end of the first to the beginning of the third. May we not imagine this day, the day of Christ in death, as the day of joy in Limbo when those there had the privilege of personal contact in their spirits with their divine Brother and Redeemer? We are speculating, but Christ did descend to the dead, and what awaited him there? Obviously, those who also were in the abode of the dead, but who lived in God, awaiting the work of the Redeemer to be accomplished. To them the good news was announced.

On this side of the grave, all was quiet and in gloom for the disciples of Christ. Except for his holy mother, they all seemed to have completely forgotten his solemn predictions that he would rise from the dead on the third day. It was a day of gloom and inactivity. The Light of the world had been snuffed out, and Life seemed now lifeless. It seemed that Death had had the final say, and that sin had conquered. But no. All was quiet, but a mighty unseen fount of life was preparing to burst forth, a Fount that would never cease to bring life to all. Let us marvel at the mystery of our Redemption, and understand that in Christ is to be found every heavenly blessing.





Season

of

Eastertide



Easter Vigil

Prayer O God, who make this most sacred night radiant with the glory of the Lord's Resurrection, stir up in your Church a spirit of adoption, so that, renewed in body and mind, we may render you undivided service. Through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, who lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today:

Easter Vigil readings: Genesis 1:1-2:2 or 1:1, 26-31a; Psalm 104:1-2, 5-6, 10, 12, 13-14, 24, 35; Genesis 22:1-18 or 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Psalm 16:5, 8, 9-10, 11; Exodus 14:15-15:1; Exodus 15:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 17-18; Isaiah 54:5-14; Psalm 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11-12, 13; Isaiah 55:1-11; Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6; Baruch 3:9-15, 32 (4:4); Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11; Ezekiel 36:16-17a, 18-28; When baptism is celebrated: Psalm 42:3, 5; 43:3, 4; When baptism is not celebrated: Isaiah 12:2-3, 4bcd, 5-6; Epistle: Rom 6:3-11; Responsorial Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23;

Gospel: Luke 24: 1-12 (Year C)

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened. (Luke 24:1-12)

Christ's Victory When St Paul addressed the Areopagus in Athens he began his speech judiciously. "*Men of Athens,*" he began, "*wherever I look I find you scrupulously religious.*" That is to say, he saw everywhere evidence of their belief in higher powers, and in this the Greeks were typical of mankind in most places and times. Paul proceeded to refer to one altar and its inscription to introduce his subject, which was the one true God and "*the man whom he has appointed*" to be the judge of the world. To accredit him, he continued, God has raised him up from the dead (Acts 17:31). We read that "*when resurrection from the dead was mentioned, some mocked,*" while others expressed an interest in hearing more. Though some attached themselves to him as believers, Paul thereupon left for Corinth. The rejection of the resurrection by most of the Areopagus illustrates how it is the experience of man that death is the end. All living things come to their end in death, and this is the tragedy and the mystery of life for man. Just as we may ask, why is there anything at all, and why are there living things, so we may surely wonder why it is that we must finally break up in our being and to all appearances completely dissolve

into dust. A babe is born with all the joy that this brings to its parents and family. He grows to his manhood and does his work in life, but then he declines to the terrible end of death. Finally he is carried out to a lonely plot in a windswept cemetery, and there, surrounded by his relatives and friends, is lowered into the grave where his mortal remains will gradually disappear. When Cardinal Newman's coffin was exhumed from the grave in preparation for his beatification by Benedict XVI, it was discovered that his remains had completely vanished. All had gone except for his regalia as a Cardinal. This is the experience of man. His lot is to be born, to live, to die, and, to pass into dust. It is the final defeat, and it cannot be avoided. He seems to come out of nothing, and seems to descend into nothing. His life is like the brief flash across the sky of the meteor, and then it disappears.

It is clear from the Gospels that this is what the ardent disciples of Jesus Christ expected from his having been cruelly put to death by his enemies. It was a shock of the first order. The better the person, the greater is the horror of the death of that person. The death of Jesus

Christ which caused such satisfaction to his enemies, let alone to Satan, was a blow of tremendous proportions to his friends and disciples. This was because of his sheer goodness. His death was, they considered, his final end and this was the most terrible of things to have come to pass. Their life had been torn asunder by the catastrophe of Christ's passion and death. Let us remember that – apart from Christ's own mother, of course – none of his disciples expected him to rise from the dead. He had died as had the other holy prophets, and most recently John the Baptist. All that remained was to give him a fitting burial. His body must be prepared, and the tomb arranged for so uniquely venerable a purpose. Gradually the remains of Jesus Christ would dissolve to the earth and he, like the rest of mankind, would be gone forever. This was the expectation that prevailed among the disciples. All was sunk in a terrible gloom. We read that the women, arriving at the tomb while it was still dark, "*found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright*

the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' Then they remembered his words" (Luke 24: 1-12). There had been the rare occasion in the past of a prophet raising someone from the dead by the power of God, and Christ had done this himself more than once by his own power. There was no precedent for simply rising from the dead, on one's own. Who was there to raise Jesus Christ from the dead? No one had ever simply risen from the dead. But, wonder of wonders, Christ simply rose, after having promised that he would, and at a certain time (on the third day), and by his own power.

But there was much more to it than that. Jesus Christ rose from the dead in his body, not just to resume the mortal life he had enjoyed with his disciples before. That would have been unspeakably remarkable in itself – for who had ever, by his own power and

prediction, performed a feat of such a kind? All the greatest persons of history are but dust and none of them raised themselves from death. But what Jesus Christ did was rise in his body to a life of divine glory. In his flesh he was glorious and immortal, and it was this divine life which he would share with us his brothers. Let us rejoice all our lives that we have been given the blessing of blessings, a share in the risen life of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, our Brother and our God.



Easter Sunday

At Mass during the Day

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 139 (138): 18, 5-6 I have risen, and I am with you still, alleluia. You have laid your hand upon me, alleluia. Too wonderful for me, this knowledge, alleluia, alleluia.

Or: Lk 24: 34; cf. Rev 1: 6 The Lord is truly risen, alleluia. To him be glory and power for all the ages of eternity, alleluia, alleluia.

Collect O God, who on this day, through your Only Begotten Son, have conquered death and unlocked for us the path to eternity, grant, we pray, that we who keep the solemnity of the Lord's Resurrection may, through the renewal brought by your Spirit, rise up in the light of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture of Easter Day: Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23; Colossians 3:1-4 or I Corinthians 5:6b-8; John 20:1-9 or Mark 16:1-7 or Luke 24:13-35

On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him." So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead. (John 20:1-9)

The Resurrection There are two things which St John seems intent on describing in this passage – firstly the discovery of the empty tomb, and secondly that Christ's disciples did not in any way expect that he would rise from the dead. Our passage tells us that *Mary Magdalene* came to the tomb on the Sunday morning while it was still dark. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that the *women* came just as dawn was beginning to break, in other words as soon as there was a glimmer of light by which to see their way out of the city to the tomb. They wished to visit the sacred body of Jesus, and anoint it with the spices they had prepared. As they approached, they could see that the great stone had been rolled back from the entrance. The body was gone. John then gives us his own testimony. Having heard the news, *he and Peter* ran to the tomb, and likewise discovered that the body had gone. Then John makes a significant remark, that "*they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead.*" It is a statement that seems to place enormous importance on the testimony of the Scriptures. During his public ministry Christ had repeatedly said to his disciples that the Son of Man "had to suffer," be rejected by the

elders and chief priests, be put to death, and then rise. This, then, was the prophecy of the Scriptures about the Messiah. Mysteriously, it was the only way God's redemptive plan would be fulfilled. When Simon Peter attempted to dissuade our Lord from the path of suffering and rejection, he sharply rebuked him, addressing him as "Satan!" Satan, then, might have been attempting to do the same. The climax of Christ's life would be to bear witness to the truth of his Person and teaching, and this would involve his death and resurrection. Our Lord made it clear that the Scriptures foretold that this was the path the Messiah must follow to save his people from their sins. Indeed, this was one of the most essential points in the Scriptures, and it was widely missed.

One of the profoundly intriguing features of the religious life of the Hebrews was its dependence on and understanding of the Sacred Scriptures. But it is clear from the Gospels that there was a widespread misunderstanding of the nature and mission of the Messiah. The people commonly looked for a liberating king who would cast off the yoke of

Rome. It is not clear what the precise notion of the Messiah as held by the religious leaders was, but in general – with a few exceptions – the leaders were entirely mistaken. They completely rejected the Messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth, and in the end brought about his death. What it all means is that the Scriptures were poorly understood by significant portions of the chosen people of God. Many things were grasped, but the most essential point was the matter of the coming Messiah. Abraham had been told that through him (i.e., Abraham) all the nations would be blessed, and gradually more and more light had been shed on this prediction. Jacob had foretold the One who would receive the sceptre. Moses had foretold the coming Prophet. Isaiah had foretold the Suffering Servant. Daniel had foretold the heavenly Son of Man. There had been many prophecies of the One who was coming, but there was a poor perception of what it all meant. The holy Simeon had identified the Child Jesus as the Messiah, and had foretold suffering as his path. Anna the prophetess had also identified him. John the Baptist had identified him, perhaps as the Suffering Servant – certainly as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the

world. Undoubtedly, the clearest mind of all in this was the hidden one – Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. But in general, the Scriptures had not been understood, that the Messiah must suffer, die and rise from the dead. This was the path to his glory and to his kingdom. When St John writes, as he does at the end of his account of his own discovery of the empty tomb, that "*they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead,*" he was surely describing the lack of understanding of the chosen people of God.

The Scriptures had not been properly understood. Christ's rising from the dead cast a great light on the entire Scriptures, on the meaning of Israel's choice and mission from God, and on the redemptive plan of God for sinful man. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the great breakthrough in the history of the world. It is the key to the mystery of God's plan, hidden from all ages and finally revealed. Without this key, all remains confused. The risen Jesus is with us now, alive in the life of the Church, and given to us in the Church's life and sacraments. It is

the risen Jesus who is celebrated today and every day in the life of each and every Christian.



Monday within the Octave of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Ex 13: 5, 9 The Lord has led you into a land flowing with milk and honey, that the law of the Lord may always be on your lips, alleluia.

Or:

The Lord has risen from the dead, as he said; let us all exult and rejoice, for he reigns for all eternity, alleluia.

Collect O God, who give constant increase to your Church by new offspring, grant that your servants may hold fast in their lives to the Sacrament they have received in faith. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 2:14, 22-33; Psalm 16:1 2a and 5, 7-11;

Matthew 28:8-15

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. Greetings, he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me. While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble. So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. (Matthew 28:8-15)

God Our Brother There is a detail in our Resurrection scene which we ought consider with great appreciation. The women have discovered the empty tomb and have been told by the angel that Jesus their Lord has risen from the dead. Matthew's description of the angel is of one who inspires heavenly awe. The angel has "descended from heaven." His "countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow" – reminding us of our Lord's own Transfiguration prior to his Passion. He tells the women not to fear, and invites them to gaze at where the Lord had lain. They were now to go quickly and tell his disciples that he had risen from the dead and that he would be going ahead of them to Galilee, just as he said he would. They would see him there. In fact, we learn from other Gospels, especially the Gospels of Luke and John, that our Lord appeared to his disciples that very day and in the days immediately following, there in Jerusalem. They met him further in Galilee. Now Jesus was risen from the dead in the flesh, but in glory. His divinity, previously veiled by his humanity, was now being revealed in his humanity. His risen manhood displayed the glory of his divinity. Let us never underestimate the Resurrection of Jesus

Christ. It was not simply a return of Jesus Christ from the dead, taking up in life from where he left off prior to his Passion. It was a passing from this life into death and then from death to glory, and all this in his human nature – that same humanity which had suffered and died. His humanity now was the means of manifesting his divine glory. In seeing the risen Jesus, the disciples gazed on the glory of the Son of God. Instead of being a veil of the divinity, the humanity of Jesus Christ now manifested the divinity. For this reason we read that the women, when met by Jesus and greeted by him, prostrated in worship before him. They "held him by the feet." Jesus was now shown in the glory of One whose place was at the right hand of the Father, above every other name.

But there is a wonderful detail. Our Lord told the women to go and tell his "brothers" that they were to go to Galilee. God the Son made man, now glorious and triumphant over death, sharing the throne of his heavenly Father, refers to his disciples as his "brothers." God the Son regards himself as our "brother." This is no new thing, for our

Lord loved his own while on the earth, and he loved them to the end. But here we are talking of him in his triumph, as the Victor over all, as the One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth had been given, as the Lord of all lords and the King of all kings. This supreme Person regards himself as our Brother. On one occasion during his public ministry he was speaking to a crowd and word came to him that his mother and his brethren wished to speak to him. He said in reply, *"Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then looking around at his disciples, he said "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my Father, that person is my mother and my sister and my brother."* God wished to draw us into his family life and make us his children. He sent his own divine Son to become one of us, to become our brother, and to share the divine life with each and all who accept him. To all who accepted him, St John wrote, he gave the power to become children of God. In our Resurrection account the triumphant Jesus refers to his disciples as his brothers. He looks on each of us who believe in him, who love him and who follow him, as his brother. In Jesus Christ, God has become my brother. How great is the dignity of

every person, then! Christ has died for all, and since his Resurrection, mankind can be divided into two groups. There are those who *are* his brothers by faith and baptism, and there are those who are *called* to be his brothers by faith and baptism. In either case, each person is endowed with an immense dignity. By uniting himself to every man and woman in his humanity, he confers on each and all a resounding status which all others must respect. It will be a defining element in the final judgment.

Each of us can say that God is my Father, and that Jesus Christ is my Brother. How great is the love, the humility, the goodness of God! There is no other religion which has such a breathtaking understanding of the infinite, transcendent God. The God of all heights has taken his place by our side and chosen to accompany us along our way to his eternal home, as our Brother and our Friend. There is nothing more we could ask for. Let us appreciate our blessings – that every heavenly blessing has been given to us in our Brother of all brothers, Jesus Christ our Lord.



Tuesday within the Octave of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 15: 3-4 He gave them the water of wisdom to drink; it will be made strong in them and will not be moved; it will raise them up for ever, alleluia.

Collect O God, who have bestowed on us paschal remedies, endow your people with heavenly gifts, so that, possessed of perfect freedom, they may rejoice in heaven over what gladdens them now on earth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 2:36-41; Psalm 33:4-5, 18-20 and 22;
John 20:11-18

Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. They asked her, Woman, why are you weeping? They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put him. At this, she turned

round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. Woman, he said, why are you weeping? Who is it you are looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him. Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and cried out in Hebrew, Rabboni! (which means Teacher). Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: I have seen the Lord! And she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20: 11-18)

Christ's Choice

At times – not often, it must be said – one hears the complaint that it is not fair that women are not called to the ministerial priesthood. In a sense it is to be expected that some women would have thoughts of attraction to the ordained priesthood, for the simple reason that the priesthood is a wonderful thing. I think I remember reading somewhere that St Therese of Lisieux as a child felt

attracted to the priesthood. The Church has formally declared, of course, that this is impossible in God's plan, but what *can* be behind this desire is the notion that an ordained public office is more important than, say, intimacy with Christ as his disciple. Now, what is of paramount importance is not office, but loving discipleship. Who were the ones who entered into the deepest intimacy with Jesus Christ during his life here on earth? They were, as we may call them, two "lay persons" who had no office in God's people. I am referring to the mother and the foster-father of our Lord. Mary and Joseph lived in a wonderfully intimate friendship with our Lord for thirty of the thirty-three years of his mortal life. Manifestly no other person attained such a friendship with him. Consider the scenes of the infancy of our Lord – the nativity scenes and those associated with them, the scene of the presentation in the Temple, with Simeon and Anna gazing with veneration on the face of the Child Jesus – these were ordinary members of God's chosen people. They had a privileged relationship with the Saviour. During our Lord's public life we read in more than one Gospel that Martha, Mary and Lazarus were special friends of our

Lord. He loved them in a special way. We read that certain women followed Jesus and the apostolic band, and ministered to them with their assistance and resources. At the last, it was certain women with Mary his mother, who stood at the cross of Jesus as he died. There was only one of the Twelve there. It was certain women who were the first to arrive at the tomb early on the Sunday morning. On Easter Sunday, the longest conversation which the risen Jesus had was with two disciples who were not of the Twelve. The principal thing is *discipleship*. When the risen Lord gave his parting commission (Matthew 28) it was not to make all the nations ordained priests, but *disciples*. *This* was the foremost thing.

While those with a special office in Christ's Church by ordination are indeed called to an intimate friendship with Jesus Christ, the vocation to a special friendship with him is not exclusive to those with this special office. It is common to all. The most important thing for any disciple is precisely this calling to friendship with Jesus, and then by his grace actually attaining this friendship and living according

to it. Who was the most blessed of all God's creatures? It was not any one of the Twelve, nor any of those who received a special apostolic mission from Christ, such as St Paul. It was, according to the inspired utterance of Elizabeth, the Virgin Mary. She was blessed among women. All generations will call her blessed, and it was her faith and her fidelity to grace – her being full of grace – that was the reason for this. She occupied no ordained office in the Church, although as Christ's mother, she was mother and model of the Church his body. Let all this be an introduction to our Gospel passage today (John 20: 11-18), in which, according to St John, the risen Jesus shows himself for the first recorded time to his disciples. We may piously assume that, though it is not recorded, Christ appeared first to his most holy mother. Beyond that, we have it before us that he appeared first of all, not to Simon Peter nor to the beloved disciple, but to Mary Magdalene. It may have been something of a reward for her coming so early to the tomb, and waiting when the tomb was discovered to be empty. She was granted a most lovely meeting with the risen Jesus, and before any of the Apostles. Consider the scene. I like to think of our

Lord acting somewhat playfully and full of joy in his victory. He asks Mary Magdalene, "*Woman, why are you weeping?*" – though, of course, he knew why she was weeping. Then came his surprise for her: "*Mary!*" He addressed her by name, and joy beyond description flooded her soul. "*Do not hold on to me,*" he continued. "*I have not yet returned to the Father.*" It is a symbol of the special dealings of Jesus Christ with *every one* of the baptized.

According to the Gospel of St John, it was *Mary Magdalene* who announced to the Apostles the fact of the Resurrection. According to the other Gospels, it was the *women*. It is surely a symbol of the richness of the vocation of all the baptized. All are called to holiness, that holiness which consists in a loving discipleship and a share in Christ's mission of bringing the Gospel to others. Each person's friendship with Jesus and share in his redemptive mission will depend on vocation and circumstances, but each possesses the great dignity of being in Jesus Christ. This is the basic and most important thing in the life of the Church. Jesus addresses each and all of us by name. It is the

expression of his personal choice. Let us cherish this choice as the foundation of life.



Wednesday within the Octave of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 25: 34 Come, you blessed of my Father;
receive the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,
alleluia.

Collect O God, who gladden us year by year with the solemnity of
the Lord's Resurrection, graciously grant, that, by celebrating these
present festivities, we may merit through them to reach eternal
joys. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns
with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 3:1-10; Psalm 105:1-4, 6-9; Luke 24:13-35

*Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus,
about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other
about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these
things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with
them; but they were kept from recognising him. He asked them, What
are you discussing together as you walk along? They stood still, their*

faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days? What things? he asked. About Jesus of Nazareth, they replied. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see. He said to them, How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going further. But they urged him

strongly, Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over. So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon. Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread. (Luke 24:13-35)

Our Companion The scene is just outside Jerusalem, and it is the first day of the new week (i.e., our Sunday) with the great Sabbath now over. All is quiet and the weather is marked by a sombre peace. The occasional cry of a bird is heard, but apart from that, there is just the subdued voice of two companions walking on the lonely road leading

away from the City. We might even say that the quiet of the morning has a touch of the eerie to it, and that this has been so ever since the Friday afternoon two days before. A great prophet had suddenly met a terrible end, orchestrated and achieved by the religious leaders, no less. This wonderful man had traversed the country and filled it with his Person, his teaching and his miraculous deeds. A little over a week before, he had spectacularly raised a person from the dead after four days in the tomb, just outside the City itself. He had entered the City, cleansed the Temple of its markets and set himself up teaching in its precincts. For his disciples he was the hope of the nation. He, they thought, would be the one to set Israel free, for there was no limit to his goodness and his power. A great shock had enveloped his friends and disciples, for the light of their life had been snuffed out. At the moment of his terrible demise, the very earth had rocked – an omen of his passing. He was now gone. The two lonely walkers continued along the road for the village of Emmaus, their voices subdued, their feelings profoundly depressed. They were lost in their brooding thoughts as they noticed a little distance behind them another solitary walker

heading along the road in the same direction as they. They slowed and allowed him to join them as their fitful discussion paused. He quietly reached them, and perhaps they allowed him to walk between them, with one on either side. They were absolutely downcast. What were you discussing? he courteously asked. They stood, distressed, and asked him in wonderment – how could you ask this? Are you a visitor, and do you not know what has just happened here in this City?

The scene is so real, so vivid, so full of factual detail. There is nothing of the mere "story" to it. It is not a tale, a myth, something of a fable. It is the report of facts that had happened years before the writing of the account. A remarkable thing was occurring in this simple, historical scene. Jesus of Nazareth, who had been mercilessly bundled to his terrible death by ruthless religious leaders, was alive in the flesh and walking on the road with his two companions. There was absolutely nothing like it in all the annals of history. This extraordinary circumstance was unfolding in the midst of the most simple ordinariness. The two depressed and perplexed companions had

between them the risen Jesus. They saw him, they heard him, and his physical presence was just as palpable as had been the presence of each of them one to the other. They did not recognize him as yet – perhaps because his fullness of risen life gave to him a special newness, and also because there was simply no expectation in them of their ever seeing him again. But, as they would soon learn, it was the same Jesus and he was joining them in their ordinary life. He was not coming to them in thunder and glory – just as he had not come in thunder and glory to Mary Magdalene a few hours before. He came, risen and victorious, but as one of them. They were still his brothers and he was taking the time, as it were, to be with two ordinary disciples. Here we see him spending a few hours with two relatively obscure disciples (one being Cleopas – perhaps the primary source of this narrative). All this tells us that the risen Jesus joins us in our daily life just as he joined them. As we walk along the road of life towards our goal, we are often depressed with the perplexities of our calling. He, the risen Jesus, is walking with us in all those perplexities of our ordinary and everyday life. He wants to know what is in our minds, and he wants us to let him cast his light

on us. There can never be such a companion as Jesus Christ for our journey!

The same risen Jesus joins us in so many ways in everyday life. He resides in his body the Church as its Head. We are the Church's members, and therefore members of Jesus Christ. We are the branches, he is the Vine. He comes to us in the preaching and teaching of the Church. He comes to us above all in the Sacraments, and in particular – on a regular basis – in the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance. Let us pause every day to let him join us and enliven our hearts with his words and his grace. In those two disciples are exemplified each of us. Let Christ be our companion as we journey along the way to our true homeland.



Thursday within the Octave of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Wis 10: 20-21 They praised in unison your conquering hand, O Lord, for wisdom opened mouths that were mute and gave eloquence to the tongues of infants, alleluia.

Collect O God, who have united the many nations in confessing your name, grant that those reborn in the font of Baptism may be one in the faith of their hearts and the homage of their deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 3:11-26; Psalm 8:2ab and 5-9; Luke 24:35-48

Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread. While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, Peace be with you. They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I

myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have. When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, Do you have anything here to eat? They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. He said to them, This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:35-48)

A Realization Laws liberalizing abortion have been passed in Spain – a country where the majority of citizens are at least nominally Catholic. It is said that the rate of abortion is much the same in Catholic countries as in others. The Catholic Church is the largest in

body among the Christian denominations, and theoretically ought be a giant in influence. But it is a sleeping giant in terms of its grassroots membership. The fact is that the great majority of Catholics do *not* go to Mass each Sunday, and it is misleading to quote the *number* of baptized Catholics (as a sign of Church strength) because it can give the impression that that number represents the number of believing, convinced Catholics. The same can be said and with even greater emphasis about the number of Christians in the world. England and Australia could be called Christian countries in the sense that most of their citizens regard themselves as in some sense Christian. But for all the *practical influence* the Christian element has on society, those two countries would be better termed secular societies. What is lacking? Of course, the answers to that question are multiple, but one thing that is lacking is simply a *realization* of the truth of the doctrines of the Christian faith. Cardinal Newman often drew a distinction between a notion and a realization. A person may have a notion of, say, Christ or the Church, while another may have a realization of Christ or the Church. For the former, Christ is just a notion, an image, a thought. He

is not apprehended as a living, personal fact. His reality may not be positively denied, but it is not positively apprehended. He is a figure of the past and the past is gone. For the latter (those who truly *realize* him), Christ is a real person and the Church is truly his body, the locale and means of his living presence. Christ is not just a figure of the past, for he lives now in his full humanity and divinity. He is accepted as being truly alive. This is a realization. The former is a mere notion. Religion will never be a real force in our lives as long as it is a mere notion. The Christian must truly realize that Jesus Christ suffered, died and truly rose. He lives now and is with us.

Our Gospel today (Luke 24:35-48) records, let us say, the attainment by the Apostles of their *realization* of the resurrection and of Christ as a living reality. He had gone from this world under terrible circumstances, and his body lay in the tomb. His life was over and finished, and with it so were the hopes and dreams of his loyal disciples. Once he was dead, all they had was a memory – recent, devastating, appalling, and crippling – but a memory nevertheless. All

they could look forward to was a receding memory of the Master. In due course, perhaps they could pick up again and live according to his teaching and his memory, and spread his teaching as they knew it. More disciples would follow – as had been the case with John the Baptist. The Baptist had gone, and his disciples had recovered his body from Herod's precincts and had buried it. Years later there would be many disciples of John scattered here and there and the infant Church would come across them. It could have been supposed that the legacy of Jesus of Nazareth would live on in a similar manner. His teaching about God and the way to him would be preserved and perhaps put into writing as had the teaching of many of the ancient prophets. But he would become a memory – we might almost say, a notion. But no, this is not what happened and the reason for it was that they saw him, met him, spoke with him and even felt him in his physical reality after he had risen from the dead. He was apprehended as a living reality. No holy man had raised him from the dead – as he had raised others from the dead during his public ministry. He raised himself from the dead. I freely lay down my life, he had told them, and I shall freely take it up

again. This he did. He took up life again, but it was a new and glorious life and they saw him in the flesh. Our Gospel gives us the account of their meeting with him. They saw and spoke with him as a group, despite their complete scepticism about the reports they had received during that first day. They gathered around him and watched him even eat. They were filled with a profound realization of the living Jesus, risen now from the dead and glorious.

What we, each of us must do is strive to realize the living fact of Jesus Christ. We do not see him but he is real, he lives and he is always near. He is our Saviour and we ought strive to be filled with the realization that he, our Friend, Brother, Saviour and God, is more real than we ourselves. We gain this realization by prayer, by spiritual reading, and by the grace of God. Our entire reality depends on him because it is through him that all things exist. On this basis we can proceed to shape our lives according to Christ's teaching. Indeed, as Cardinal Newman used to say, this world is a mere veil when compared with the unseen, and in the first instance that unseen reality behind the

veil is Jesus Christ. Let us be real, and not nominal, Christians then, with a lively faith that is made up not of mere notions but of realizations.



Friday within the Octave of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 78 (77): 53 The Lord led his people in hope, while the sea engulfed their foes, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who gave us the Paschal Mystery in the covenant you established for reconciling the human race, so dispose our minds, we pray, that what we celebrate by professing the faith we may express in deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 4:1-12; Psalm 118:1-2 and 4, 22-27a;
 John 21:1-14

Afterwards Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. I'm going out to fish, Simon Peter told them, and they said, We'll go with you. So they went out and got

into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. He called out to them, Friends, have you caught anything? No, they answered. He said, Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some. When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, It is the Lord! As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, It is the Lord, he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, Bring some of the fish you have just caught. Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. None of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you? They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus

appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. (John 21:14)

Simon Peter One of the positive results of Scriptural studies and analysis during the recent era of Christian scholarship has been the appreciation of the distinctive approach and teaching of the different Gospels. Each has its own approach with its special emphasis in the presentation of the Gospel. It has always been seen that the Fourth Gospel in many ways is on its own. It is distinct from the other three – different as they are, too, from one another. Luke is very different from Mark, and Matthew is different from both, but the three of them have very many similarities. Accordingly, they are termed the "synoptic" Gospels. The Gospel of John, though, is on its own. One of the things that we immediately notice in the Johannine Gospel's presentation of the Resurrection is that the last chapter (ch.21) seems to be an important postscript. The conclusion of chapter 20 (verses 30-31) seems to indicate this, as does the conclusion of chapter 21 (verses 23-25). Inspired as it is, the final chapter may have been added by

disciples of the school of John – with his approval, or even after his demise, yet containing his teaching, his emphasis and his clear and detailed recollections. Our Gospel today is the commencement of this chapter and is a sequel to the account in the previous chapter of the appearances of the risen Christ on the day of his resurrection and a week later, both in or near *Jerusalem*. In the Gospel of St Mark – which is generally considered to present Simon Peter's account – the angel announces to the women at the empty tomb that the risen Jesus will see the "disciples and Peter" in *Galilee*. Our chapter 21 of the Gospel of St John gives us an account of "the third time" Jesus appeared to his Apostles as a group, the first two occurring in Jerusalem, as narrated in chapter 20. This "third time" was in *Galilee*. Now, there is a distinctive emphasis in the presentation of this third appearance to the body of the Apostles. It is that Simon Peter is well to the fore in both discipleship and in his appointed role in the mission of the risen Jesus. We may even say that the scene portrayed in this chapter consists of two parts or dimensions, the first made up of our verses

today, and the second being the rest of the chapter in which Simon's office as pastor of Christ's sheep is confirmed.

In our passage today, *Simon's love for Jesus* is set forth and is the foundation for what will follow. Simon is presented as with a group of the disciples and it at the sea of Tiberius. He is with "*Thomas*," – who featured in the previous chapter – "*and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee*," – James and John – "*and two other of his disciples*." So there were six of the Eleven, enough to consider the appearance that followed as an appearance to the Apostolic group. Simon Peter is the leader – he leads the others to fish for the night, and come morning there was Jesus standing on the shore. We may imagine the scene. The dawn is breaking. The moon has provided light for the night's work which has come to nothing. All is still, with the sound of gentle tide lapping against the boat, large enough for the six men and their fishing equipment. The sky is clear, all is still with the sound of the occasional sea-bird crying as the sun begins to rise. They were only about a hundred yards from land and there on the

shore they noticed a solitary figure. He was standing there, observing. Then they hear his voice, clear and penetrating across the surface of the Lake. "*Have you caught anything?*" No, they answered. "*Throw your net to the right, and you will.*" The authority with which this was said led them immediately to do as requested, and lo! The net heaved with a sudden force, a force they could not manage. In an instant it was filled with fish, so many as to be beyond their ability to haul in. Immediately "*the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, it is the Lord!*" We notice that it is not he who immediately acts, but Simon Peter. Simon in an instant puts on his main garment – for he was stripped for his work – and bounds into the water, making his way to land on foot. The slowness of the vessel would not do for him – he forges ahead in his love for his risen Master, heart pounding, mind aflame and breathless with ardent love. The Master! The Lord! The Love of his life! His throat filled with knotted emotion, thinking of nothing else, he outstrips the others in his race to be with the supreme Person of his life. Our passage shows us *the love of a disciple*.

Simon Peter had his flaws, and they came to the fore when the crunch came during the Passion of our Lord. He had buckled and denied knowing Jesus Christ. The glance of Christ towards him immediately following this, reminding him of Christ's prediction that he would deny him, nearly broke his heart. He loved Jesus, loved him dearly, but he was weak. Now, on the shore, Jesus was there awaiting him. Peter forged ahead in the water, with great and strong strides, his whole frame facing the Lord of his life whom he so loved. He arrives on the shore and stands before his loving Lord and hears his words. Peter in our passage today is a picture of the loving disciple of Jesus Christ. Let us contemplate him, and resolve to love Jesus Christ in our turn as Peter did.



Saturday within the Octave of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Ps 105 (104): 43 The Lord brought out his people with joy, his chosen ones with shouts of rejoicing, alleluia.

Collect O God, who by the abundance of your grace give increase to the peoples who believe in you, look with favour on those you have chosen and clothe with blessed immortality those reborn through the Sacrament of Baptism. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 4:13-21; Psalm 118:1 and 14-21;
Mark 16:9-15

When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterwards Jesus appeared in a different

form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen him after he had risen. He said to them, Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. (Mark 16:9-15)

The Heart of Man

Several years back there was an interview with Richard Dawkins, the self-professed atheist from Oxford, conducted by a journalist of the Australian Dateline television programme. The journalist repeatedly told Dawkins that he was entirely unusual in his positive atheism (which was correct), but it soon became evident that the journalist himself agreed with much of what Dawkins stood for. They were agreed that religion is the source of great harm and violence in the world, and that this is how it has always been. Now, any sensible religious person would agree that great numbers of religious people have been the source of violence and harm. But this is not to say

that "religion" has necessarily been the source of their violence. A person who is an adherent of a religion that inculcates love and justice might, but for reasons other than his religion, be violent and unjust. He may spectacularly sin *against* the tenets of his religion. Of course, there may be religions that do indeed incline their adherents to violence. On the other hand, many who profess not to be religious have also been violent and harmful. Did Hitler profess or have any religion, or did Lenin and Stalin – despite their upbringings? Were the leaders of the French Revolution, and in particular its Terror, religious? The idea is absurd. Napoleon Bonaparte (a Catholic) in practical terms was at best a deist, but he was scarcely religious in an active sense. He became a little more so as his days drew to their close on the far-flung island of St Helena. There is no doubt, though, that as far as modern secular man is concerned, the profession of religion has been discredited by the crimes of many of its professors. However, all ought understand, including the atheist typified by Richard Dawkins, that the mere fact that a person professes religion and engages in religious practices does not mean that his *heart* is properly moral and religious. His bad actions exclude him

as a representative of true religion. As our Lord said, by their fruits you will know them. Religion is a matter of the heart. That having been said, the question arises, what are some of the features of the heart that are necessary for *true* religion?

In our Gospel today, our Lord's disciples failed in a fundamental requisite – though not, of course, irrevocably. They failed in faith. Specifically, they did not believe the reports by direct eye-witnesses that he had risen from the dead. Inasmuch as the Christian religion depends on the acceptance of certain propositions as being historical facts, this failure in belief was a fundamental failure. For instance, if a person does not believe that Jesus Christ died on the Cross and on the third day rose from the dead – and Islam does not accept either – then it is impossible for him to be counted as a Christian. We read that Mary Magdalene "*went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterwards Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while*

they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either" (Mark 16:9-15). A dispassionate observer might claim that there was nothing wrong with the state of heart of Christ's disciples in their unbelief. It was just that they lacked, in their view, sufficient evidence. They were not intellectually satisfied by the claims that he had been seen in the flesh. But as a matter of fact, we have it on the *word of Christ* that what was wrong and what accounted for their lack of belief was the *state of their hearts*. We read that "*Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen him after he had risen.*" This alone shows how religion is very much a matter of the heart. This applies most especially to revealed religion which involves a revelation that is beyond the mere natural. In the nature of the case the heart of man must be properly disposed. If the heart of man is not right, not only will he not practise his religion as he should – and perhaps bring disgrace on revealed religion as a result – but his heart will not even be able to believe. His heart will be too "hard."

As it turns out, we need the grace of God to properly dispose our hearts to accept the religion he has revealed in his Son Jesus Christ. We need a heart that is not "hard." We need a heart that is inclined to believe the testimony of the Gospel. Our Lord said to his Apostles that on his rising from the dead, while they loved him, their hearts were too hard. They failed to believe not because of lack of evidence, but because of a deeper failure. His risen presence before them changed that, and with that they received the mission to make disciples of all the nations. Let us pray that the grace of God will create in us all a new heart, a heart disposed to accept wholeheartedly the Gospel – a heart that is good soil for the seed that is the Word.



Second Sunday of Easter (Divine Mercy Sunday)

Entrance Antiphon 1 Pt 2: 2 Like newborn infants, you must long for the pure, spiritual milk, that in him you may grow to salvation, alleluia.

Or: 4 Esdr 2: 36-37 Receive the joy of your glory, giving thanks to God, who has called you into the heavenly kingdom, alleluia.

Collect God of everlasting mercy, who in the very recurrence of the paschal feast kindle the faith of the people you have made your own, increase, we pray, the grace you have bestowed, that all may grasp and rightly understand in what font they have been washed, by whose Spirit they have been reborn, by whose Blood they have been redeemed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 5:12-16; Psalm 117;

Apocalypse 1:9-13.17-19; John 20:19-31

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you! After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord! But he said to them, Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it. A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you! Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe. Thomas said to him, My Lord and my God! Then Jesus told him, Because you have seen me, you

have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20: 19-31)

Mercy and Sin There have been numerous philosophers in the history of human thought, and some of them have been great. More rarely, there have been those claiming a direct contact with the divine and then the personal authority to speak on behalf of the divine. That is to say, they have claimed to be prophets. Mahomet made this claim, and there have been others as well. The one who accepts the Judaeo-Christian revelation would probably have no trouble in allowing that in a certain sense there have been "prophets" outside the pale of this revelation, in that God can speak to whom he wills. In a certain sense, the Magi from the East, being led by a heavenly star, were the recipients of a kind of revelation and were spokesmen of it. They told the inhabitants of Jerusalem that a heavenly star was leading them to the

infant King. They were "prophets" of the arrival of the Messiah. As is obvious, being a prophet was not unique to Jesus Christ, even though the Christian will count him as the greatest of the prophets and much more than a prophet. There are, however, several things about Jesus Christ that are unique to him. None of the Old Testament prophets claimed to be divine – of course. Mahomet never claimed to be divine. Nor did Buddha (who may have been agnostic in respect to the divine, anyway), nor did Zoroaster. Jesus Christ claimed to be divine, and this was the principal reason why he was condemned to death by the religious leaders of the people. Intimately connected with this divine claim was another – with its related practice – which distinguished Jesus Christ. I refer to his ready practice of the forgiveness of sins. No other prophet before him claimed the personal authority to forgive sins. Moses never said to anyone, nor had Abraham, Isaac or Jacob before him, nor did any prophet after him, say to anyone, "I forgive you your sins." There were ceremonies and rituals of various kinds designed to symbolize man's appeal for forgiveness and the pardon of God as a result. But no man claimed the power to

forgive sins – except Jesus Christ. It is no surprise to read in the Gospels that this caused a sensation among the religious leaders. Were he not to have had this divine power, to say the least it would have been an extraordinary act of religious bravado.

It meant, of course, that any sinner could go to a particular man – Jesus of Nazareth – and ask to be forgiven for sins against God. At a word and on his own authority, he could pardon any man his sins. If Jesus indeed had this authority, it would be an extraordinary benefit for sinners. They would have a clear and certain access to the forgiveness of sins – and this is the fundamental problem for every man and woman. How can I obtain the forgiveness of my sins? Of course, the appreciation of this blessing is contingent on the appreciation of the tragedy and the curse of sin. If there is little or no sense of the evil of sin, there will be little or no sense of the magnificence of the blessing of forgiveness. Our Lord forgave the sinful woman after she had entered the house of the Pharisee where Jesus was dining. Your sins are forgiven you, he said to her in the presence of his hosts. It was a great

blessing for her. But now, did any of the scribes and Pharisees, observing this display of divine authority, consider asking Christ for forgiveness of their sins? Obviously not, and the reason was that, apart from lacking faith in the Person and authority of Christ, they lacked the sense of personal sin. They were not burdened with a consciousness that they were great sinners – and our Lord shows elsewhere that they *were* great sinners – and anxious to find some way of obtaining forgiveness. In a sense, this is the modern problem. Typically, we too lack a sense of personal sin. We may allow that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, but our minds and hearts are all too readily clouded with indifference. We lack a concern for sin – at least for deliberate venial sin. As a result, we lack an appreciation for the gift of divine mercy as expressed in the ready pardon of our sins. This divine pardon for sin as constantly present in the Person of Jesus Christ in the Gospels, has been handed on by him to his ordained representatives. The result is that now this blessing is even more available than it was when our Lord himself walked the earth. This is the doctrine and the reality of the

forgiveness of sins in action, and as available to each member of the Church.

On the evening of the day our Lord rose from the dead he appeared to the Apostolic band. Having rebuked them for their failure to believe the announcement of his resurrection, he conferred on them his power to forgive sins (John 20: 19-31). It was an extraordinary blessing of divine mercy, and unprecedented in religion. Men were now invested with the power to forgive sins. It means that the divine mercy is readily available wherever those invested men go. They were to go all over the world bringing the forgiveness of sins to all the nations. It is a principal reason for entering the Church which Christ founded on the rock of Peter. Let us have a deep appreciation of the tragedy of personal sin and of the blessing of divine pardon so readily available to all.



Monday of the Second Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rom 6: 9 Christ, having risen from the dead, dies now no more; death will no longer have dominion over him, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who have been renewed by paschal remedies, transcending the likeness of our earthly parentage, may be transformed in the image of our heavenly maker. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 4:23-31; Psalm 2:1-3, 4-9; John 3:1-8

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him. In reply Jesus declared, I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. How can a man be born when he is old? Nicodemus asked. Surely he cannot enter a second time into

his mother's womb to be born! Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. (John 3:1-8)

Rebirth Our scene from the Gospel today opens with an introduction to the person of Nicodemus. In the Gospel of St John, "the Jews" had been introduced in the very first chapter. "The Jews," – clearly meaning *certain leaders* of the Jews (especially the aristocracy of the Jerusalem Temple), "sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem" to John the Baptist to ask him about his identity and mission. John sent back the message that the Messiah had come, and that he was already among them (1:26), though they did not know him. Elsewhere in the Gospel our Lord refers to the testimony about him given by John, implying that the leaders of the Jews well knew of this testimony. In the second

chapter "the Jews" demand from our Lord a sign authenticating his authority to do what he had been doing. In the third chapter, Nicodemus, "a man of the Pharisees," is introduced. He is "a ruler of the Jews." Incidentally, it is immediately evident that John does not accuse the Jewish *people* of enmity against Christ, nor *all* the rulers of the Jews. Here, very early in his Gospel, he shows that there were some among them who accepted that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God, for Nicodemus – himself one of "the Jews" as John calls the leaders – states this. "Rabbi," he said to Jesus, "*we* know" that you are a teacher from God, which is to say, a prophet. Nicodemus himself was a disciple, and so was Joseph of Arimathea who was also a member of the ruling council. Indeed, John says that "many even of the authorities believed in him", but secretly out of fear (John 12:42). But it is clear that the influential elements among them, the ones who carried the day, became implacably hostile to Christ. Now, it is to Nicodemus, this member of the ruling council, that Christ declares a key point in his teaching about the Kingdom of God – that Kingdom which was so manifestly the focus of his preaching and teaching. Everywhere in the

Gospels we see him explaining what the Kingdom of God is like, and what is required of those who wish to enter the Kingdom. But it all hinges on being born again, and interestingly, in the Gospel of St John it is one of the leaders of the Jews who very early in the public ministry hears this teaching of our Lord. Our Lord presents this revelation to one of the leaders of the Jews personally.

No one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born again. This requirement would scarcely have occurred to anyone, and it obviously had not occurred to the leaders of the Jews as represented by Nicodemus. That Christ meant it literally – a true beginning of life in some sense – is evident from the immediate question of Nicodemus. Did this mean that a man must, absurdly, be born from his mother's *womb again*? His question was a request for clarification, though expressed in characteristic Jewish hyperbole. Our Lord repeats his statement with the clarification that was sought. A man must be born again "*of water and the Spirit.*" It will come about by the action of water and the action of the Spirit. It is manifestly – in view of the

standing Christian practice prior to the writing of the Gospel – an allusion to the effect of Christian baptism. The pouring of water and the coming of the Spirit therein would bring about the new birth that is necessary for entry into the Kingdom of God. "*Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*" Physical parentage gives birth to a physical life, while the birth brought about by the Holy Spirit involves a spiritual life. This is a true rebirth, a new beginning to life, but it is a different kind of life from that possessed as a result of physical birth. We who are totally accustomed to the doctrine and practice of Baptism may fail to appreciate the radical character of this doctrine and its announcement to a member of the ruling council. Christ was preaching the arrival of the Kingdom everywhere and was backing up his authority not only by his manifest holiness but by his miracles. "No one could do the miracles you do unless God were with him," Nicodemus had candidly told him. The Kingdom was meant for all of God's people, but here our Lord was saying that it was not enough simply to be born into the people of God. One had to be born yet again, born into a new kind of life, if access to the Kingdom was to

be had (John 3:1-8). Let us endeavour to appreciate the immense gift of Baptism, then! So simple and so accessible as it is, it is the occasion of receiving all the blessings God intends for man.

By our baptism we are immersed in the person of Christ, united to him by the power of the Holy Spirit, and plunged into the life of the triune God. At our baptism God unites us to Jesus Christ and gives us a share in his Spirit, and with that we are instantly united to the Father as well. We are taken to the loving Source of all reality, and bound therein. The blessings of the Kingdom of God flood our souls and we become instantly like unto Christ – but with the inclination to sin remaining nevertheless. However, there is thus planted in our souls the wherewithal to overcome this inclination and to invade the hegemony of Satan with the weapons of God. Holiness is rendered absolutely possible. Thus baptized, let us make life in Christ our daily ambition, then!



Tuesday of the Second Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 19: 7, 6 Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to God, for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns, alleluia.

Collect Enable us, we pray, almighty God, to proclaim the power of the risen Lord, that we, who have received the pledge of his gift, may come to possess all he gives when it is fully revealed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 4: 32-37; Psalm 93: 1-2, 5; John 3:7b-15

Jesus said to Nicodemus, (Do not wonder that I told you,) 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. How can this be? Nicodemus asked. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our

testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven- the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:7b-15)

Faith In our Gospel passage today, Nicodemus is in wonderment at Christ's statement that in order to enter the Kingdom of God a man must be born again. The Christian is so accustomed to this teaching that he has probably lost the sense of its radical newness. It is evident from Nicodemus's difficulty that Christ gave every impression that he meant literally and exactly what he said. A new birth was required. Our Lord did not "tone down" his language, but spoke plainly. We are reminded of our Lord's teaching in the Synagogue (chapter 6 of the same Gospel) in which he announced the doctrine of the Eucharist. He stated that unless people ate his flesh and drank his blood, they would have no life in them. Why could he not have toned down his language and couched

it in less startling terms? It would not have been so divisive. He would have retained his disciples. But no. So important was it for salvation that our Lord, who had demonstrated his almighty power and his truthfulness, judged it necessary to reveal so amazing a doctrine clearly and publicly. His hearers could not understand how such a thing could be done, for they could only think in terms of the eating and drinking of their everyday experience. So they gave up on Jesus Christ. They could not understand, so they refused to believe. It would seem that the same temptation faced Nicodemus when he heard the doctrine from the lips of Christ of the rebirth that was necessary in order to see the Kingdom of God. He could not understand, because all he could think of was the normal experience of a person's birth to life. How could a person possibly be "born again"? I cannot see how it can be, so I cannot see how I can believe. That is the temptation facing the one who hears the proclamation of revealed religion. There are so many things we cannot possibly understand in revealed religion. We cannot understand Christ's being God and Man. We cannot understand his being one of three divine Persons in the one God. We cannot

understand the Eucharist. We cannot understand – though we can apprehend – the rebirth by water and the Spirit.

It brings us to the fundamental importance of *faith* in revealed religion. By means of *faith* in the word of Jesus Christ we come to know things which we cannot understand. But as our Lord points out to Nicodemus, the reasonableness of this faith is itself not beyond our understanding. By that I mean that it is not hard to understand that we can come to know things which we do not understand, and on the word of one who knows. For instance, there are many things in our ordinary everyday experience which we do not understand, but which we have no doubt exist and occur – on the word of those who know. *"Do not wonder that I told you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."* Our Lord refers to the wind – a natural process many may not understand, certainly in the time of our Lord. No one might understand why it is that polyps causing terminal cancer in a person's bowel are

continuing to appear, but the patient believes – and knows – on the word of the doctor that steps must now be taken. By his reference to the wind, our Lord is saying that matters of ordinary life show that faith in the word of the one who knows is perfectly reasonable, even if one cannot understand such matters. Faith in matters supernatural is perfectly reasonable, then. Our Lord tells Nicodemus that "*we speak of what we know.*" Perhaps the plural pronoun (*we*) is an allusion to our Lord's communion with his disciples and an allusion to the future Church that will speak in his name, and of which he is the head. "*I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.*" Ultimately our authority is divine. We believe on the word of Jesus Christ who is the Son of God. "*No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven- the Son of Man.*"

Further, and most importantly, this belief is the doorway to life eternal. Faith is the foundation of true religion, and most importantly, of revealed religion. It is the foundation of the Christian life and it

takes us to our heavenly homeland. *"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life"* (John 3:7b 15). Nicodemus was a man who tended to rely on what he could understand rather than on the word of Jesus Christ. *He overcame his temptation and became a true disciple.* Let us follow his example and make faith in the word of our Lord the basis of our whole life.



Wednesday of the Second Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17): 50; 22 (21): 23 I will praise you,
Lord, among the nations; I will tell of your name to my kin, alleluia.

Collect As we recall year by year the mysteries by which, through the restoration of its original dignity, human nature has received the hope of rising again, we earnestly beseech your mercy, Lord, that what we celebrate in faith we may possess in unending love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 5:17-26; Psalm 34:2-9; John 3:16-21

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the judgment:

Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God. (John 3:16-21)

Belief and Unbelief This sweeping, panoramic passage contains several solemn utterances which could not be sufficiently analysed here. It speaks of God, his nature as being sheer love, and his action of sending his Son to save the world. It also proclaims a warning to all, and it also provides an explanation for the warning. Let us notice immediately that while the Good News of salvation is proclaimed, the *weight* of these sentences seems to lie in the warning of *condemnation*. Because of the sin of the world, one ought be very alive to the threat of the divine judgment. God so loved the world that he gave his Son, in order that (Greek: *hina*) "*whoever believes in him shall not perish...*" Death would come, were it not for the coming of the Son

of God. The way to avoid death and gain life is through faith in the Son. The first three verses of the passage manifest a mounting concern for the condemnation of man, culminating in the third (verse 18) which states the issues with the utmost plainness: believe and you will not be condemned; fail to believe and you stand condemned already. *"Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son"* (3:18). The vast jaws of Hell are wide open before the world. If you believe, you will not be taken. If you do not believe, you will most certainly be lost. It is a stark picture, and as I say, the inspired author seems intent on awakening his reader to the grand threat before him. It is a statement which, incidentally, exactly parallels the words of Christ as reported in the Gospel of St Mark: *"The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe, will be condemned"* (16:16). The salvation of man hinges on his decision to believe in the Son of God. Now – and this introduces us to the explanation offered in the second part of the passage – it might strike some as a marvel that so much would depend

on mere faith. After all, is one to be *blamed* for *not* having faith? How is it that not having faith is so *blameworthy*?

Our passage proclaims this warning against unbelief, but it then passes on to an explanation, for we read in the next sentence that "*This is the judgment* (that is, of God): *Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.*" So the divine condemnation is on those who "*loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.*" The unbelief which is utterly blameworthy is that which springs from the love of darkness and evil deeds. It would seem that this is the only true unbelief, in God's sight. A good person may be failing to believe – as was, say, Paul prior to his conversion – but he may well be believing implicitly, to the extent that he has light. The Light has come into the world, but certain people may not yet perceive that Light in its fullness. To the extent that they perceive it, they may be men of implicit faith. In his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* in 1875 defending the Catholic doctrine of Papal Infallibility against Gladstone, Newman states that Conscience is the

aboriginal vicar of Christ. That is to say, in obeying one's conscience in all genuineness, one is implicitly obeying Christ the Light of the world. Further, by this implicit faith one is disposing oneself for a subsequent acceptance of the full truth of Christ's Person in the teaching and life of the Church. In such a case there is a form of faith but it is undeveloped. We are reminded of our Lord's first meeting with Nathanael in the same Gospel of St John. Our Lord said of him that there is an Israelite in whom there is no guile. Nathanael did not love darkness, and his deeds were good. Once he came to know Christ, he believed. But there were others who did not love the light and whose deeds were evil, and at various points in the Gospel of St John our Lord condemns certain ones who refused belief in him. Their hearts were in sin, and this was the origin of their unbelief. And so St John writes, *"Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God"* (John 3:16-21).

John Henry Newman wrote in one of his Anglican sermons that "Faith is a moral principle. It is created in the mind ... by probabilities; ... A good and bad man will think very different things probable" ("Faith and Reason Contrasted", Epiphany 1839, no.35). A good heart will ready a person for faith in Jesus Christ, whereas a bad heart will dispose him to refuse to believe. It is in this circumstance that faith will be rewarded, and unbelief will be condemned. Let us ask God for the grace of being good soil that receives the seed of God's revelation and produces a harvest.



Thursday of the Second Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67): 8-9, 20 O God, when you went forth before your people, marching with them and living among them, the earth trembled, heavens poured down rain, alleluia.

Collect O God, who for the salvation of the world brought about the paschal sacrifice, be favourable to the supplications of your people, so that Christ our High Priest, interceding on our behalf, may by his likeness to ourselves bring us reconciliation, and by his equality with you free us from our sins. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 5:27-33; Psalm 34:2, 9, 17-20; John 3:31-36

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. The man who has

accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him. (John 3:31-36)

Wrath During the third decade of the nineteenth century in England, the Oxford Movement was rapidly developing. It was spearheaded by a small group of Oxford dons at the centre of which was John Henry Newman – but he was one of a tight group of high-minded friends. From their pens flowed published tracts, books, sermons and reviews. They aimed at a spiritual renewal of the Anglican Church, understood by them as involving a revival of the catholic ethos of the Caroline divines of the seventeenth century – which itself purported to refer back to the Church of the Fathers. It was a Catholic revival, and its final upshot was the passing over of its leader and certain others to communion with the Church of Rome. At one point in the Movement –

it was during the 1830s – Newman received a visit from some members of Cambridge University, and the subject of the liberalism of certain Cambridge men came up. He observed that what they needed in their religion was a lot more *fear*. They needed to be more *fearful* of God. The fear of God was a theme which Newman returned to at various times in his famous sermons. He claimed that modern man too often looks on God as absolutely benevolent, even in respect to sin. The modern image of God is such that we do not fear him, and in fact we take little notice of him. There is a corollary to this. It is that modern man shows relatively little concern for personal and public "sin," and yet he becomes profoundly incensed at personal and public immorality. Consider the proportion of space given to news of unethical, immoral behaviour of individuals and institutions, and to ethical failures in government or public persons. Such failures are roundly condemned (as often they should be), illustrating the objective reality of the moral realm. People fear being exposed as immoral for this will involve the wrath of society. But they have few apprehensions in respect to "sin," because this involves merely the supposed wrath of

God. The modern media will not accuse a person of being "sinful," only immoral or unethical. What is behind this is the absence of God. While the wrath of society is feared, the wrath of God is not.

This is to say that one of the most obviously counter-cultural aspects of revealed religion in the modern day is the revelation of the *wrath of God in respect to sin*. God revealed himself as pure love, as is shown in the person of Jesus Christ, and as is summed up in the terse definition of St John in one of his Letters – that God is love. But modern secular man, for whom God is absent from daily life, has little difficulty with the notion that God is love. This is because he imagines the love of God as a benign acceptance of everything. God is just a benevolent backdrop to life and reality. There are, he deems, intolerable evils in the world and this discounts the proposition that there is an infinite and holy God active in the world. But to the extent that the thought of God is admitted by him at all, he takes it to be a thought of mere benevolence. In fact, this is a facet of the relegation of God beyond the margins of the world of daily life. But it has been

revealed that God's love is a holy love, a mighty love for all that is good. It is a holy love that will not bear sin. God will not accept the slightest sin and this non-acceptance of sin is what the inspired Scriptures call his wrath. Sin will ultimately be completely rejected by the all-holy God, and this rejection will be a manifestation of divine wrath. Wrath is the converse of a love that is holy. There is a parallel in the indignation of modern man and media towards unethical practices because of the harm it inflicts on others. So too with God in respect to sin. While society is alert to morality and ignores "sin," God sees every sin and, precisely because of his love for the sinner, hates his sin. All this is to say that we need to recover a sense of the wrath of our loving God. His wrath is his judgment on sin. In our Gospel passage today, St John refers to the sin of rejecting the Son of God. It will incur the wrath of God. *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him"* (John 3: 31-36).

The person who has little fear of God is a foolish person. The Scriptures are replete with references to the wrath of God on sin. Compare the teaching of our Lord as it is presented in the four Gospels with that of any of the prophets. Christ's references and warnings of the judgment of God and of the punishment of Hell are far more telling and frequent than anything in the Old Testament. In an age that ignores the living God, we ought give special thought to the divine judgment. It will help us turn away from sin and believe the Good News of God's infinite love for all.



Friday of the Second Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5: 9-10 You have redeemed us, Lord, by your Blood, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us into a kingdom, priests for our God, alleluia.

Collect O God, hope and light of the sincere, we humbly entreat you to dispose our hearts to offer you worthy prayer and ever to extol you by dutiful proclamation of your praise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 5:34-42; Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14; John 6:1-15

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Feast was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards him, he said to Philip, Where

shall we buy bread for these people to eat? He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a little! Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many? Jesus said, Make the people sit down. There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted. So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world. Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. (John 6:1-15)

The Loaves In the Gospel of St John our Lord is presented as going back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem in Judea. He comes from Galilee to Judea for the baptism of John and to begin his public ministry. He returns to Galilee where he changes the water into wine at Cana. Then "*after not many days*" at Capernaum, he "*went up to Jerusalem.*" There he cleanses the Temple, gives his discourse to Nicodemus and sojourns in the environs in Judea. Then he leaves for Galilee, passing through Samaria where he converts the woman at Sychar, together with many of her townspeople. Back again in Galilee where he cured the nobleman's son, he returns to Jerusalem for "*a feast of the Jews.*" Then we notice – in the chapter from which our passage today is drawn – that he is back in Galilee again, where he works the miracle of the loaves for the five thousand men. Despite the danger, he returns to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles and teaches in the temple. There he encounters his enemies, disputes with them, teaching and healing. An attempt is even made to stone him. It is mentioned that he is in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Dedication – so possibly he has stayed from the Feast of Tabernacles to the Feast of the

Dedication. He escapes an attempt to arrest him, going "*beyond Jordan*." Then he returns to Bethany where he raises Lazarus, and then enters the City for his final redemptive act. Of course, no one would maintain that St John is meaning to present this sequence of events as exactly reflecting all historical details. It is a broad picture made up of significant "signs" and teachings. The feature I am drawing attention to here is the frequent reference to Jerusalem, its feasts and its Temple. These made up the centre of the religion of the chosen people and our Lord is portrayed as acknowledging this by his actions. The point is, I suggest, that many of the "signs" Christ works show that all of this will be transformed in the new dispensation. There will be a new centre, a new temple, new feasts, a new sacrifice and Jesus Christ himself will be its heart and soul.

We are surely alerted to this in our Lord's first public intervention in Jerusalem, as presented by St John. It occurs in the second chapter, "and the Passover of the Jews was near at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem." Christ cleanses the Temple and points to

himself – to his body – as the new Temple. After the Temple – his body – is destroyed, he will raise it up in three days. Inasmuch as this announcement occurs near the feast of the Passover, and inasmuch as Christ's death itself would be a new Passover, we are reminded not only of the *new Temple* but also of the *new Passover* of his death that is coming. There will not only be a new Temple, but a new Passover, because there will be a new liberation from slavery. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today. We notice that just as this first public manifestation of Christ in the Temple (John 2:13-25) was introduced by the circumstance that "*the Passover of the Jews was at hand*," so the event portrayed in today's Gospel (John 6:1-15) is also introduced by the same circumstance, expressed even in a very similar Greek wording. The Passover of the Jews was near at hand. Our Gospel event today then, also points to a coming transformation of the meaning of the Passover. Christ proceeds to feed the multitudes with a mere handful of food – just as the feast of the Passover is nigh. We remember the children of Israel being led out of slavery into the wilderness on their sojourn to the Promised Land. On the way they were fed from Heaven

with manna sent by God. A new liberation is now coming, a new Passover, a new departure from the land of slavery in sin to the Promised Land of life in God. For the journey a new manna would be given, the true bread from heaven. That heavenly Bread is the body of Christ. He is our life. In the former event, the new Temple will be the body of Christ, risen from the dead. In the present event, the new manna will be the body of Christ, risen from the dead. Christ is destined to be man's true life, his all, his means of life in God and his means of contact with God. The new religion revealed by God consists in union with Christ who is our Temple and our means of communion with the Father.

The miracle done, the people recognized that Christ was the promised Prophet, and the promised King – the Messiah. But they had entirely mistaken notions of the Prophet and the Messiah. They thought he would bring a new temporal liberation, of the same order only greater than that delivered by Moses. But no. Jesus Christ the Son of God had come to liberate the world from sin. He would do this by the

sacrifice of his body as a victim on the Cross. The sacrificed Jesus is the ever-present sacrifice of the new people. He is its new Temple, and is its new and constant heavenly food for the journey to the Promised Land. We are speaking of the Holy Eucharist, the summit and source of revealed religion and of our entire Christian life.



Saturday of the Second Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. 1 Pt 2: 9 O chosen people, proclaim the mighty works of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light, alleluia.

Collect Set aside, O Lord, the bond of sentence written for us by the law of sin, which in the Paschal Mystery you canceled through the Resurrection of Christ your Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, who willed that through the paschal mysteries the gates of mercy should stand open for your faithful, look upon us and have mercy, that as we follow, by your gift, the way you desire for us, so may we never stray from the paths of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 6:1-7; Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19; John 6:16-21

When evening came the disciples of Jesus went down to the sea, got into a boat and went across for Capharnaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come back to them. A strong wind blew and the sea began to stir. They had rowed some twenty five or thirty furlongs when they saw Jesus walking on the sea and approaching the boat. They were afraid, but he said to them: It is I. Do not fear. Then they took him on board willingly enough and very soon the boat reached the shore to which they were going. (John 6:16-21)

The New Moses Our passage today is from the Gospel of St John, and one of the many connections this Gospel makes is that between Jesus Christ and Moses. At the outset of the Gospel, in its very prologue, Christ is compared with two prophets before him: John the Baptist and Moses. John the Baptist "*was not the Light; he was sent to bear witness to the Light.*" It is Jesus Christ who "*is the true Light*" (1:8-9). Through Moses "*the law was given to us; through Jesus Christ grace came to us, and truth*" (1:17). The hint is that Jesus Christ is a

new and much greater Moses. In the sixth chapter of the Gospel, Christ gives a great "sign" that led the people present to identify him as "*the Prophet who is to come into the world.*" The Scriptures had pronounced that there had never been a prophet equal to Moses, and Moses himself had spoken of the Prophet who would come. They were to listen to him – suggesting that he would be a greater Prophet than Moses. The "sign" (6:14) that Christ had given of feeding the multitudes on the other side of the Sea of Tiberius away from their homes (perhaps suggesting "the wilderness"), surely conjured up the memory of Moses at the head of his people in the wilderness. Moses had appealed to God and God had sent manna from heaven. Here was a new Moses - "*the Prophet,*" no less. This "sign" given, our Lord presumably directs his disciples to make their way back across the Lake to Capernaum, which they proceeded to do. Evening had come, and perhaps our Lord was busy still in the ministry of the day or had withdrawn to pray. He indicated to them that he would follow, which they interpreted to mean that he would follow them in one of the other boats. So they set off across the water, and "*it was already dark, but*

Jesus had not come to them" (6:17). Imagine the scene - "the sea was rising, because a strong wind was blowing" (6:18). Long before, the children of Israel had passed across the Red Sea with Moses at their head. The disciples are in difficulty and there before them is Jesus "walking on the sea, and drawing near to the boat" (6:19).

Moses had been the great liberator raised up by God to bring the children of Israel out of slavery to the Promised Land. He had been the redeemer of the people from the thralldom of Egypt. He had led them across the Red Sea into the wilderness, and there, as a result of his prayer to God, the people had been fed daily with manna from heaven. Thus they eventually passed through the desert into the land given by God to their forefathers and promised to them through the mouth of Moses. A new and much greater Moses has now come. There is no difficulty he cannot save us from. Whatever be the storms that beat about our craft – the craft of our own individual lives, or the craft of the Church – our Moses is always near at hand. Many times in the course of history the Church has been subjected to

appalling vicissitudes. Let us think of the three centuries – three centuries! – following the death and resurrection of Christ and his command to make disciples of all the nations. There were centuries of repeated and ruthless persecutions. Then finally a springtime arrived, and it was shown that Christ had been with them on the turbulent Sea. He had been repeating to them all along, *Do not be afraid. It is I!* I am with you. These words of Christ to his disciples are themselves very evocative. They mirror the words of Yahweh God speaking to Moses from the Burning Bush. Moses had asked for his name so as to tell the people which God (among the various gods) had sent him. The answer was given: *I am – I am who I am!* Let us remember that Jesus Christ was and is the Word made flesh. Those stunning words had come from the one God, who would be revealed to be triune. That is to say, they had come from the Word, who now was flesh. Here on the turbulent water he utters them again to his disciples and through them to his Church down through the ages in the midst of their recurring vicissitudes. *I am*, and I am with you in the midst of everything, come

what may. Significantly, when the disciples heard him they willingly received him on board, and "soon" they reached the shore.

Not only does God's chosen people have a new liberator, a new Moses, but all of mankind does. God has sent his Son to lead his people across the sea of life and sin into the Promised Land of life in God. The new Moses is Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and now with his people as they bring this good news to all the nations. The nations have a new vocation: it is to be disciples of Jesus Christ, through whom have come grace and truth. He is always near, and he is our Saviour. Let us always hear his words, uttered once to Moses, repeated to his disciples, and passed on to us: *"It is I! Do not be afraid!"* (John 6:16-21)



Third Sunday of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 66 (65): 1-2 Cry out with joy to God, all the earth; O sing to the glory of his name. O render him glorious praise, alleluia.

Collect May your people exult for ever, O God, in renewed youthfulness of spirit, so that, rejoicing now in the restored glory of our adoption, we may look forward in confident hope to the rejoicing of the day of resurrection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 5:27-32.40-41; Psalm 29;

Apocalypse 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

Afterwards Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. I'm going out to fish, Simon Peter

told them, and they said, We'll go with you. So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. He called out to them, Friends, haven't you any fish? No, they answered. He said, Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some. When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, It is the Lord! As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, It is the Lord, he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. Then they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, Bring some of the fish you have just caught. Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. None of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you? They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them,

and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Yes, Lord, he said, you know that I love you. Jesus said, Feed my lambs. Again Jesus said, Simon son of John, do you truly love me? He answered, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Jesus said, Take care of my sheep. The third time he said to him, Simon son of John, do you love me? Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, Do you love me? He said, Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you. Jesus said, Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, Follow me! (John 21: 1-19)

The Resurrection

The Oxford Movement in the third decade of nineteenth century England was, among other things, an attempt to

restore the authority and spiritual life of the Anglican Church. This was understood by its leaders as requiring a recovery of the Catholic ethos of the early Church, as interpreted theologically by the Caroline divines of the seventeenth century. All acknowledge that John Henry Newman was its driving intellectual leader, and the elements of his thought continue to be the object of widespread research. Now, Newman saw clearly that one foe of Christian faith in his time was Rationalism. The rationalism that Newman opposed insisted that the validity of Faith and its tenets must be judged by the requirements of so-called "Reason." In effect, "Reason" meant the formal requirements of logic and demonstration, such that if the believer could not demonstrate his case according to the canons of scientific proof, his case could not stand. Newman opposed this notion of the reasonable as being unreal. It was not how human beings arrived at valid convictions. The human being becomes convinced of something not just because it can be "demonstrated," but because of a host of factors that are usually impossible to put into strict syllogistic form. Perhaps the most important factor (among others) leading a person to be convinced of the

truth of something is antecedent probability. A formal "demonstration" of the existence of God, which might satisfy the demands of formal logic, *of itself and alone* will not usually lead to personal *conviction* of its truth. Rather, what will be decisive will be the convergence of factors which, while in *logic* might be probabilities, amount, in his personal reason and judgment, to a certainty. Newman also said that in matters moral and religious, what a person perceives to be true will depend in large measure on his own moral state – the state of his heart, of his will. This in turn depends on his fidelity to duty. This is what I wish to highlight in referring to Newman: the importance of *antecedent probability* in arriving at religious truth, and of *the state of a person's heart* in what he *expects* to be the truth.

We have a beautiful Gospel scene before us today, the scene of the risen Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. There he is as dawn is breaking, a lone figure whom the disciples see from their boat. He is soon recognized by the beloved disciple, but this recognition followed on their encounter with the risen Jesus back in Jerusalem on the day of

his resurrection. Our scene today invites us to recall the *frame of mind* of our Lord's closest disciples, his Apostles no less, following his terrible death and hasty burial on the Friday afternoon. A great gloom enveloped them and during the entire Sabbath day that followed, a great darkness covered their souls. It was well represented by the two forlorn disciples leaving Jerusalem for Emmaus on the Sunday morning. They were joined by the risen Jesus, but failed to recognize him. The striking thing about the entire group of disciples – with the exception, we may be sure, of Christ's own mother – was their conviction that his death was the end. They did not have the slightest sense of the *probability* of his rising from the dead. He had spoken of this explicitly. He had foretold his rejection, his condemnation, his passion, his death – and had even foretold how he would die. It would be by crucifixion. But he had repeatedly said he would also rise – and had specified that it would be on the third day. Nevertheless, they had no sense even of its *probability*, its *likelihood*, let alone of its certainty. They utterly lacked what Newman says is the principal factor leading to conviction in matters of real life; a sense of its *antecedent probability*. Not only did

they not expect it, but they *expected the opposite*. Because of this they did not accept the various reports coming from reliable witnesses on the day of his resurrection. They regarded it as overwhelmingly improbable, despite all they had seen and known of Christ and of what he had predicted. Thomas even refused to accept the joint witness of the other Apostles. Why did they regard it as so improbable? Our Lord made it clear to them that it was due to the *hardness of their hearts*.

As I mentioned earlier, Newman also taught that in matters moral and religious, what a person accepts as likely will depend on his moral state. Religious conviction – or faith – does not just depend on so-called "Reason." It depends on the *state of our hearts*, for this will shape what we consider to be *probable*. In turn, our sense of what is probable will shape our response to those many things that point to the truth of something. It was because of the state of their hearts that the Apostles did not accept the news of the resurrection – in other words, the good news that is the Gospel. They regarded it as totally improbable. It was only when the fact of it was presented before their

eyes that they became convinced. Let us ask our Lord to pour his grace into our hearts and make of them good soil for the great truth of the resurrection.



Monday of the Third Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon The Good Shepherd has risen, who laid down his life for his sheep and willingly died for his flock, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, putting off our old self with all its ways, we may live as Christ did, for through the healing paschal remedies you have conformed us to his nature. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 6:8-15; Psalm 119:23-24, 26-27, 29-30;
John 6:22-29

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realised that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. Once the crowd realised that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the

boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, Rabbi, when did you get here? Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval. Then they asked him, What must we do to do the works God requires? Jesus answered, The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent. (John 6:22-29)

The Work of Works One of the notable features of the modern university is its abundance and variety of degree programs. There is scarcely a field of human activity that cannot be studied at a university. It was not always so. Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century there was at Oxford, for instance, an overwhelming stress on Mathematics and the Greek and Latin Classics. An indicator of the change that was coming was the foundation of the professorship of political economy at Oxford in 1825, with Nassau William Senior being

elected to fill the chair. At present, one of the most dominant disciplines at tertiary level is Economics, and this stands to reason because Economics is one of the most dominant interests of Western culture. Consider the space given to economic and commercial matters in the printed press and in television and radio news. This of itself is not to be regretted because of the fundamental importance of the material dimension to life. Man must live off his material resources, and so it is of immense importance that his material resources be harvested and adequately organized – and this is what the subject called Economics is all about. Famine, disease and material deprivation rage in various parts of the world, and the world has a responsibility to provide economic security for the family of man. We must get our economics right and for this reason the Church has an extensive theological teaching on the economic life of society. That having been said, the point I wish to make here is that *our special danger* is to look to economic security and wellbeing as being the key to true security and happiness. If only we are economically healthy and secure, all will be well. If we are not, then whatever else we might have, it is all

flawed. This has always been the danger for man and society, but in the past it has not endangered the acceptance of religion. Societies have pursued economic progress, but have also endeavoured to be in favour with the gods – or God. Now in a secular culture, though, we tend to dispense with God and place our hopes in material and economic progress alone. We aspire for food that will not last.

This has always been a danger, and our Lord refers to it directly in our Gospel today. The day before he had worked a spectacular miracle, a "sign" of what was coming. He had fed thousands with a mere handful of food and had gathered up many baskets of the fragments remaining. He had shown that he could provide sustenance for the multitudes, but it was meant by him as a sign of the special heavenly sustenance he would bestow on the world. That food from heaven would be his own Self, his body given for the life of the world. All that the multitude took from it, though, was a great sign of coming material security. They would scarcely need to work, with Christ in their midst! The day had ended with their eating to their full,

with delicious bread and fish (for we remember the delicious wine, changed from water at the wedding feast of Cana). But the next day they discovered that Jesus had gone and they hastened back to Capernaum and discovered him there. How did you get here, they asked him? Our Lord did not bother with an answer to that question. The only reason why they were looking for him, he replied, was because they had been satisfied materially. They had had their fill, and they wanted more of the same. Their following of him, their seeking after him, was for material purposes. They were not seeking the salvation of their souls. They were concerned only with the food that cannot last. *"Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."* But then comes the central question of the passage: *"Then they asked him, What must we do to do the works God requires?"* That is to say, what is the central work that God asks of us? What is it that humanity must achieve most of all? It is not just to be religious – for, after all, most of humanity in its long history has been "religious." What humanity must do more than anything is believe in the one whom God has sent. *"Jesus*

answered, The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent"
(John 6:22-29).

Just before he ascended into heaven, our Lord gave to his disciples – which is to say, to the Church – a solemn charge. It was to go to the whole world and *make disciples* of all the nations. This is the work of the Church, to believe in Jesus Christ and to bring mankind to that belief. This is the work par excellence of man, to believe in Jesus Christ. The religion of Jesus Christ is not just one religion among many – all of them representing man's aspiration for the divine. Jesus Christ is the one sent by God to save fallen man and to bring him into union with the One for whom he longs. Our work in life is to be united in faith with Jesus Christ. Our fulfilment will be attained in this. All other activity – all other work we do – must be understood and pursued in the context of this primary work. So then, now I begin!



Tuesday of the Third Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 19: 5; 12: 10 Sing praise to our God, all you who fear God, both small and great, for now salvation and strength have come, and the power of his Christ, alleluia.

Collect O God, who open wide the gates of the heavenly Kingdom to those reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, pour out on your servants an increase of the grace you have bestowed, that, having been purged of all sins, they may lack nothing that in your kindness you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 7:51- 8:1a; Ps. 31:3cd-4, 6, 7b, 8a, 17, 21ab;
John 6:30-35

So they asked Jesus, What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' Jesus

said to them, I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Sir, they said, from now on give us this bread. Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:30-35)

The True Bread

If there is one thing which is obvious from a reading of the Old Testament it is the defining character of the Exodus events. The departure from Egypt, the years in the wilderness, and the entry into the Promised Land, profoundly shaped the religious outlook of the children of Israel. So marked is this memory as evidenced in the Old Testament Scriptures, that (as an aside) one cannot but be a little sceptical of the weight given by many to the current lack of archaeological evidence for the great events referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures. Where is the archaeological evidence, it is urged, for the event of the departure from Egypt, the long sojourn in the wilderness,

the mass invasion by Israel of the land of Canaan – and for other supposed facts such as the career of David, Solomon, and so forth? While there is indeed a *present* lack of *that* kind of evidence, there is the fact of the great memory by the chosen people, so manifest in their Scriptures. The nation was shaped by this memory, and *our Lord himself*, true God and true man, *refers explicitly* to these past historical events. In our very passage today he refers to Moses and to the manna he gave from heaven. I make these points simply to stress how much the Exodus events were a pivotal religious truth for the children of Israel. Our Gospel scene today (John 6:30-35) opens with the crowds making a demand of Jesus. He had told them that the work that God asked of them was to believe in him. To this they responded, "*What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'*" In the desert, Moses fed the people with manna from heaven for their entire sojourn. You, Jesus of Nazareth, have multiplied the loaves and the fish, could you not do what Moses did, and feed us continually with bread from

heaven? What sign will you do that we may see and believe you? Our Lord replies by pointing prophetically to what will be the true bread from heaven – his own Person.

Though the manna which Israel received in the desert came from God in answer to the prayer of Moses, it was not heavenly food. It was earthly and served to sustain life on earth. It was a material substance which modern scholars have even attempted to identify. Some suggest it was the resin from the Tamarisk tree, others a form of plant lice, or the thalli of certain lichens, or *Psilocybe cubensis* mushrooms, or a kosher species of locust, or the sap of certain succulent plants. It was no heavenly substance. The manna in the desert had the powers of material food – it was God's miraculous gift of earthly food. Our Lord says that the true bread of God is *heavenly*. It does indeed come down from heaven and gives life to the world. It is heavenly bread which gives life forever and to all mankind. The manna in the desert had none of these powers. This is a remarkable announcement which those who are fully familiar with the doctrine of

the Eucharist may take too much for granted. Our Lord is heralding an extraordinary food for the journey. He is acting as a new Moses for the children of Israel, and for all of mankind. A new sustenance is coming for all. As Moses, by God's power, provided *earthly* food for the journey of the children of Israel, so Jesus Christ will provide *heavenly* food for the journey of all. It will be the true bread from heaven, the bread that manna prefigured. Manna was merely a pointer to the true bread from heaven that would take all of humanity to life in God and heaven. What is this heavenly food? *"Sir, they said, from now on give us this bread. Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty"* (John 6:30-35). Our Lord calmly and publicly makes a breathtaking claim which had no precedent in all of the Scriptures, and which placed himself far above all. He himself is the bread of life that God has sent from heaven. It is he himself who gives life to the whole world. He is the answer to true hunger and true thirst. If a person lives on him, his true hunger will be satisfied.

Our Lord is placing himself at the very centre of revealed religion. Never before had those things been said that Jesus Christ was now saying. He is himself the heart and soul of true religion, and a person who lives on him and in him will possess a heavenly life that is far more than this terrestrial life. In order to live, in order to survive the journey through the wilderness of life, we must go to Jesus. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry. He is the source of life, life here and life everlasting. He is speaking as God would speak. Let us then look on Jesus Christ as our all. If we truly possess him by our love and our faith, by our devout hearing of his word from the Church, and by our sincere reception of him in the Sacraments, life will be ours forever.



Wednesday of the Third Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 71 (70): 8, 23 Let my mouth be filled with your praise, that I may sing aloud; my lips shall shout for joy, when I sing to you, alleluia.

Collect Be present to your family, O Lord, we pray, and graciously ensure those you have endowed with the grace of faith an eternal share in the Resurrection of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 8:1b-8; Psalm 66:1-7a; John 6:35-40

Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at

the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:35-40)

Come to Him!

The world seems to be marked by unending vicissitudes. Wars break out and reach their conclusion, civil strife erupts, earthquakes bring incalculable damage to life and property, numerous banks begin to fail as debtors across a nation default en masse, famine and disease strikes this or that country, and so the sorry tale goes on. In his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, written in 1864, John Henry Newman writes, "*I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress. The sight of the world is nothing else than the prophet's scroll, full of 'lamentation, and mourning, and woe'.*" Newman writes of the "*aimless courses the greatness and littleness of man... the curtain hung over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion,*

that condition of the whole race.. all this is a vision to dizzy and appal" (ch. V). It is, we might say, an unending struggle to keep "head above water." There is just no simple solution to the suffering and evil of the world. There is no one key, no single formula that will "fix it" for man. Now this entire phenomena of a broken world constantly being sucked towards death and all that leads to death is but the manifestation and fruit of the deeper catastrophe of sin. We know the cause of the world's broken condition because it has been revealed to us. It is due to sin, the sin of man at the very beginning. The flawed character of so much of human history merely shows the enormity of sin which is its original and ongoing cause. If the evils of the world are so extensive as to defy man's efforts at a solution, what could possibly be said of a remedy being found for its very source which is sin? Ah! The Remedy has come, and whatever be the complexity of evil and suffering, together with the prospects for individuals and all of humanity together, in a very real sense the Remedy is remarkably simple. God has given the Remedy.

There is one thing which every man and woman is called to do in order to deal in ultimate terms with his or her condition and prospects. The ultimate answer, the one thing man must do, is to come to Jesus *in faith*. At times a thought might come to us that it would have been so much easier to have *seen* Jesus and to have come to him in a directly physical sense. Now we cannot see him. We have to come to him in faith. But notice what our Lord says in our passage today, that "*as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.*" There were many who saw him and who did not believe. There was one who was called to live with him, to be with him constantly, to be his companion, to share actively in his mission, to receive some of his powers such as that of healing, and yet he not only left him but positively betrayed him. Having had the inestimable opportunity of seeing the Incarnate Son of God did not assure that a person would persevere in faith. The ultimate answer to man's dubious situation so fraught with threat and sin is to come to Jesus in faith. The answer is simple, though very demanding in its consequences: "*I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in*

me will never be thirsty." The one who comes to Jesus in faith has received the grace to belong to Jesus, for our Lord says that *"All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away."* We are the Father's gift to Jesus, and he will receive us into his friendship. Moreover, the divine plan is to care for us and to raise us to eternal life with him forever. *"For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day."* Christ is determined not to lose any of us but to save us from all that could do us ultimate harm. He wishes each of us to live forever in him. *"For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day"* (John 6:35-40).

As opposed to the tangle and mystery of the problems of life and the world, there is a simple Remedy. It is simple in its direction, but immense in its consequences. The way ahead, the Remedy to be applied, is to come to Jesus in faith, to give oneself to him, to persevere

in faith, and to live and work according to this faith. It is to *act* on the grace of faith and to resolve to belong to him. If we belong to Jesus and live out our lives according to this self-donation, then Jesus will care for us. He will not lose us. He will raise us up to be with him forever. The way ahead is clear – so let us take it, then!

A Second Reflection: (Acts 8: 1-8)

Trust in God In today's gospel passage our Lord declares that it is the Father's will that he should lose nothing of what the Father had given to him (John 6: 39). This should be the source of a great sense of security: no circumstances need destroy or weaken that all important relationship which we have been given with Christ. We see an instance of this played out in the first reading (Acts of the Apostles 8: 1-8). With Stephen stoned to death, Saul began a furious persecution of the infant Church, scattering the Christians from Jerusalem. But what was the upshot of this? The fleeing disciples went from place to place *preaching the Good News*. The persecution was the direct cause of more and more coming to know the Lord. Perhaps the greatest sequel

of all was the conversion of Saul himself. In the midst of great tribulation the hand of the Lord was upon the Church.

As Paul would write in one of his Letters, nothing can come between us and the love of God in Christ. So we should face adversity with trust in the power of God, determined to use the adversity to further the plan of God in our regard. As Pope John Paul II used repeatedly to say, Be not afraid!



Thursday of the Third Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ex 15: 1-2 Let us sing to the Lord, for he has gloriously triumphed. The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, let us feel your compassion more readily during these days when, by your gift, we have known it more fully, so that those you have freed from the darkness of error may cling more firmly to the teachings of your truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 8:26-40; Ps. 66:8-9. 16-17. 20; John 6:44-51

Jesus said, No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. No-one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. I tell you

the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. (John 6:44-51)

His Flesh Prior to our passage today, our Lord had said that the one who comes to him will never hunger, and the one who believes in him will never thirst. He has come from heaven as the One sent by the Father in order to give everlasting life to all who believe in him (John 6: 35-40). He is the One to whom they ought come in order to have life. His hearers object to his exalted claims – they know him and they knew his parents. How can he say that he has come down from heaven? In his answer our Lord warns that they will not be able to come to him – no one will have the power to do so (*oudeis dunatai elthein*) – unless the Father should draw him. That is to say, a special grace is required to be able to come to Jesus and believe in him. The

obvious implication is that their murmuring at our Lord's teaching is a sign that they are not sufficiently in a state of divine grace. We remember how the Angel Gabriel when coming into the presence of the Virgin Mary addressed her as being "full of grace." The Lord was with her – so the Father was with her, for she was fully in the state of grace. Now, what was the upshot of her union with God? She believed. Once she understood what was being asked of her, her reply was immediate: "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word.*" She was full of grace; the Lord was with her, and her response was one of obedient faith. She may be looked to as the pattern of what our Lord speaks of in our passage today: "*Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.*" If we are looking to God; if we are listening to him with an obedient faith; if we are subject to the action and grace of God, we shall come to Jesus in faith. A prior disposition of heart, an existing relationship with God, is therefore required if a person is to come to Jesus and receive from him the life eternal which is his gift. The niggardly and grumbling response to our Lord's teaching about himself is a sign that they are not listening

to the Father in their lives. Their negative response to the word of Jesus was a sign that they lacked true religion.

It soon becomes more evident that belief requires a grace and a disposition beyond the natural, because the revelation which now begins to be given is astonishing and absolutely unprecedented. Our Lord has spoken of himself as having been sent by the Father and as having come down from heaven. That he gave the impression of meaning this literally is shown by their response that this could not be, because they knew where he came from and also who his parents were. He compares himself with the manna that God had sent to give them food and life while in the desert. So our Lord repeats what he has said: *"I am the bread of life."* Moreover, while their fathers had the manna to eat in the desert, they all died. The bread from heaven that is our Lord himself will bring life everlasting. *"Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he*

will live for ever." Whatever of the manna in the desert, this is magnificent bread, the bread of life indeed, an extraordinary gift from God. But there is more, for to refer to himself as "the bread of life" with an evocation of the memory of the manna in the desert is to use a slightly vague expression. Christ's being "the bread of life" could have meant just his teaching; it could have meant only his never-to-be-forgotten example; or it could have meant simply his life-giving friendship. But no – it included all of these things of course, but over and above them all it meant something far more striking and, indeed, startling. The "bread" which had come down from heaven and which was the Person of Jesus himself was his very flesh. *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world"* (John 6:44-51). So while their forefathers ate the manna in the desert and yet eventually died, from now on eternal life will be offered with the food that is Christ. That food is his flesh – and it is food indeed.

Nothing like this had ever been said by any prophet before him. It was utterly new – but of course with distant types of it and pointers to it in the religion, beliefs, and ritual of the Old Testament. No other prophet had claimed to be the bread from heaven that would give eternal life to the world, and that this bread would be his own flesh. Our Lord's words must have been a sensation, and must have caused a tremendous stir. It was the mystery of mysteries connected with his Person. In all of his mounting witness to his own Person and teaching, this act of witness is perhaps the most signal. The true bread of heaven would be the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth. What on earth did he mean? His uncompromising response would follow.

A Second Reflection: (Acts 8: 6-40)

Spirit of God The Holy Spirit draws us to Jesus and to the Father. Our Lord said at the Last Supper that eternal life is this, to know you Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. On the occasion of our Gospel today (John 6: 44), our Lord said that no one comes to him unless he is drawn by the Father. Now, how does the

Father draw us to the Son? It is by the action of the Holy Spirit. We see a striking instance of this in the work of the deacon Philip as narrated in Acts 8: 26-40: The Spirit said to Philip, “*Go up and meet that chariot.*” He did so, and began instructing the Ethiopian on the meaning of the Scriptures and how they spoke of Jesus. His words led to the Ethiopian coming to know and believe in Jesus, and seeking baptism. With this, “*Philip was taken away by the Spirit of the Lord.*”

The Holy Spirit is the great divine Agent by means of whom we come to know the Lord Jesus, and through Jesus the Father, for “*to see me is to see the Father.*” Let us pray constantly then to be led by the Holy Spirit to come to know Jesus, and in our everyday life to lead others to know him.



Friday of the Third Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5: 12 Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and divinity, and wisdom and strength and honour, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who have come to know the grace of the Lord's Resurrection, may, through the love of the Spirit, ourselves rise to newness of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 9:1 20; Psalm 117:1bc, 2; John 6:52 59

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood

remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live for ever. He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. (John 6:52-59)

The Eucharist The Oxford Movement of the third decade of nineteenth century England strove to defend intellectually the dogmatic character of Christianity against a growing liberalism that eschewed revealed dogma as rationally unsustainable. The Movement of 1833 insisted on the inviolable character of revealed dogma, and on the uniqueness of revealed religion. Revealed religion could not be reduced to what might be called the Natural Religion which is evidenced across the sweep of human history and society. However, this was not to say that the only form of divine revelation was the Judaeo-Christian Revelation – as recorded in the inspired Old and New Testaments. John Henry Newman firmly taught that there was a universal revelation,

which is to say that the religions of man contained – apart from their errors – certain tenets which in one way or another God had been revealing to the peoples. This universal revelation was not authenticated, but its presence could be judged by the yardstick of Judaeo-Christian Revelation which was authenticated. From the Christian perspective, this point could be granted in respect to, say, certain teachings of Islam on the One God and his absolute transcendence. There is no god but the One God of Abraham. I refer to this teaching, perfectly true as far as it goes, as an introduction to our Gospel today. There is no other god but the Lord and he dwells in light inaccessible. He is beyond. But if this is all that is said about God's relationship with man and the world, then it stops far short of the fullness of his revelation. In fact it is open to the admission of numerous errors about him. For as it turns out, God is not simply beyond, above, high and utterly other. He is also unbelievably near and at one with us. He is God-with-us. He chose a people so as to prepare to make a home with both them and the world. And, breathtaking surprise! God the Son became one of us so as to be with us as our

Brother. More still! The God who is our Brother bore on his shoulders the sins of each of us and died to set us free from them. He rose, returned to the right hand of his heavenly Father, and by their joint gift of the Spirit, brought each of us who are baptized into union with the three divine Persons.

God is thus revealed as a God who loves and serves. He kneels before his friends as represented in the Twelve, and washes their feet, going on from there to die for them. But especially amazing is his ongoing gift which is revealed in our Gospel passage today. *"Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him."* Let us remember that our Lord's unique words on this are uttered *publicly*. Were we to have had only the first three gospels (called the "synoptics" because of their likeness to one another), we may have

thought that it was only in the privacy of the Last Supper that our Lord revealed the stunning gift of the Eucharist. But this is not so. It was revealed in the full light of day, publicly, in a synagogue – the synagogue of Capernaum, no less. Our Lord did not even "tone it down" by explaining that the gift of his flesh as food would be in a sacramental mode. It was the starkest of statements. If they were to live, they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. The one who eats his flesh will be raised up by him at the last day. He is not speaking metaphorically, he insists. My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Nothing like this had ever been said before, let alone publicly for it to be reported and gossiped about everywhere – and perhaps distorted and used by his enemies. It was a daring and unprecedented announcement and was, in fact, a fundamental teaching of the new revelation by Jesus Christ. God – the God of light inaccessible – was pouring himself out for man as their very food. He was not only before them as their Brother, but he was becoming much nearer still. He was, as their Brother and their God, making himself their very sustenance. They were to feed on him, and in this way they would live

forever. It is an ultimate revelation of the love of God. God is utter love. How beautiful is God!

The Holy Eucharist, coming to us in the life and the ministry of the Church which is the mystical body of Christ, is our principal means of union with the God of all heights. *"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me."* Together with the doctrines of the triune God, the Incarnation and the Atonement, the doctrine of the Holy Eucharist is the most remarkable religious doctrine in the history of all religions. It is the mystery of faith, and it is, in the celebration of Holy Mass, the ongoing revelation of the love of God for man.

A Second Reflection: (Acts 9: 1-20)

Our Precious Vocation. G. K. Chesterton was an English lay convert of the early decades of the 20th century who became a great apologist for Christianity and Catholicism. His great friend, a cradle Catholic and

prominent apologist for Catholicism, was Hillaire Belloc. I have read that one of them coined the quip that "How odd of God to choose the Jews." Actually, it seems to have come from the pen of William Norman Ewer. Whatever of its author, it points to the special election by God of the Jews as his chosen people with a world mission. But the remark is applicable to every vocation. Why me, and not others? Each of us is *chosen* by God in Christ "to be holy and full of love in his sight" for reasons we do not know. Our vocation is precious and it is mysterious. Consider the mysteriousness and the uniqueness of St Paul's vocation, as narrated in Acts 9: 1-20. The Lord Jesus told Ananias that "*this man is my chosen instrument to bring my name before pagans and pagan kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he himself must suffer for my name.*" What sort of background did Paul have for this extraordinary calling? A seemingly poor one indeed, and scarcely to be compared with that of the Twelve. Yet he was Christ's chosen instrument. Why him? There is a great mystery here manifesting the inscrutable mercy of God and his loving power.

Each of us has a vocation, a calling that has its origins in eternity, before the world began. Each of us is the object of God's inscrutable mercy, his loving choice. Our vocation, whatever it be, is precious. Let us not squander it. Live it to the full, daily. Let us meditate at length on the calling of St Paul, and its lessons for us.



Saturday of the Third Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Col 2: 12 You have been buried with Christ in Baptism, through which you also rose again by faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead, alleluia.

Collect O God, who in the font of Baptism have made new those who believe in you, keep safe those reborn in Christ, that, defeating every onslaught of error, they may faithfully preserve the grace of your blessing. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,

Scripture today: Acts 9:31-42; Psalm 116:12-17; John 6:60-69

On hearing Jesus' teaching, many of his disciples said, This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it? Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who

would betray him. He went on to say, This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him. From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. You do not want to leave too, do you? Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God. (John 6:60-69)

The Word of Life

The Christian, and in particular the Catholic, precisely because of his gift of supernatural faith from his baptism, might have difficulty appreciating the impact of Christ's singular teaching on his hearers at the time. We accept Christ as being not merely the greatest of the prophets, not merely the Prophet and Messiah foretold by the Scriptures, but the very Son of God, God from God who has become man. This fundamental wonder validates all other wonders announced by him. So we take in our stride, as it were, the various mysteries of our Faith – the danger being that we can take dogma casually and for granted, and fail to live our life in a manner truly based

on these mysteries. It is worth the trouble to place ourselves in the scenes of the Gospels and imagine Jesus Christ setting forth his teaching. It was "bad enough," as we might express it, for the Pharisees and religious leaders to have heard Jesus speaking of God as his own Father in a way that placed him on a par with God; it was "bad enough" to have heard him say repeatedly that he had actually come down from heaven where he was before; it was "bad enough" to have heard and seen him flouting their traditions and rulings on such matters as the manner of Sabbath observance; it was "bad enough" to have heard him state that he and the Father are one, and that before Moses ever was, *I AM*. Here in the Synagogue, though, he had the temerity to proclaim that his own flesh must be eaten and his own blood be drunk if people were to have life. This unprecedented teaching with nothing of its like in the prophets before him, divided his very disciples. Many left and returned to their homes, saying that Jesus of Nazareth was, in effect, impossible. We get the impression that there was a majority walk-out and Jesus was left with the Twelve – and, of course – various others. As a result of the proclamation of the doctrine of the Eucharist

our Lord was left with a considerably diminished constituency, as some might say nowadays. It was, pundits would have called it, a political and marketing gaffe, and that he was finished from then on.

Our Lord saw this – for it is obvious from the Gospels that in intelligence he transcended all parties. The Eucharist was part of an ensemble of teachings about his own Person which Christ gave, the acceptance of which was to be part and parcel of the following of him. He would give his own flesh to be eaten and his own blood to be drunk, and this would be the means whereby people would receive life eternal. The immediate wonder was the statement that his own flesh would be food bringing life eternal. But to speak of the separation of the body and blood also evoked the thought of a *victim sacrificed*. His words having this allusion, clearly he himself would be the Victim. Did his hearers catch anything of this evocation, this allusion, this point? We are not informed. By eating of the sacrificed victim, a person shared in the effect of the sacrifice which was reconciliation and communion with God. A great Sacrifice was coming, and Jesus would

be the sacrifice. Clearly, too, only he could be the Priest. With it there would be a great communion in this sacrifice – and by participating in it they would share in his life, life eternal. Thus would the sin of the world be taken away and its blessings brought to those who believed in him and accepted his word. It was a breathtaking doctrine and the only basis for accepting it could be that he, Jesus, had uttered it. But many of his disciples thought it was too much – it was "over the top," impossible. But he had said it and without any qualification. So if they were to continue following him, this doctrine would be "all part of the package," as one might say. So they left him – and so it has been in crisis moments in the history of the Church ever since. The doctrine of the Eucharist is the mystery of our faith and is one of the fundamental tests of belief and discipleship. Seeing so many of his disciples leave, our Lord turns to the Twelve and asks if they too planned to go. Peter – significantly for the future of the Church and Peter's successors, answers. *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God"* (John 6:60-69).

I myself date the true turning away of Judas from this point. We do not know how well or poorly Judas had been growing in discipleship following his personal call, and prior to this announcement by Jesus. None of the disciples had been perfect in their discipleship, and Judas remains in the shadows as do others of the Twelve. But it is at this point, immediately after Simon Peter's magnificent profession of faith and acceptance of Christ's doctrine, that Christ refers to Judas as a devil. I suspect that Judas, in his heart, rejected the doctrine he had just heard, but chose to remain in our Lord's company. Why? We do not know, but his motives became profoundly compromised. Sad as it would have been, it would have been better if he had left. But now Satan had a clear foothold among the Twelve, and in Judas, had one of his own. How important is total acceptance of this doctrine!



The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 33 (32): 5-6 The merciful love of the Lord fills the earth; by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, lead us to a share in the joys of heaven, so that the humble flock may reach where the brave Shepherd has gone before. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 13:14.43-52; Psalm 99;
Apocalypse 7:9.14-17; John 10: 27-30

Jesus said to the Jews, My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (John 10: 27-30)

After the Fall

One of the most notable developments of the very recent period has been the rise of a world-wide concern for the environment. Pope Francis published an Encyclical on it. The nations have realized that man has spoiled much of the world's natural habitat, and that his future resources and the beauty of his abode is under serious threat. This general concern cannot but be good, and it is an excellent thing that we are now far more concerned to protect the world than merely to exploit it. Such a concern, though, ought be consistent, and should include a concern for deeper areas of destruction. I am referring to the deterioration of man's moral environment which goes on from generation to generation in the life of society and in individuals. This is, strangely, of little concern for many persons. The natural world is real and concrete for them, and it is appalling to them that its beauty and its resources are being so profoundly spoiled. The moral world, though, is not very real and concrete because it is not visible and tactile. What is real is what is tangible. This is an assumption which has been developing for the last few centuries such that now it is a great philosophical question whether there is, for

instance, a supernatural at all. The assumption just mentioned also affects our perception of the moral dimension of man. Our tendency is to regard it as secondary and somewhat subjective, whereas in fact it is primary, fundamental and absolutely objective. It is the moral life of man that affects everything for good or for ill, including the way he cherishes or despoils his physical environment. I make this observation to introduce the calamity that occurred right at the first appearance in history of man. He did something which had horrific effects, not just on his physical environment but on his entire moral world. He was the child of God, coming from God's hand and placed by him in what the inspired Scriptures call "a garden in Eden." There God "placed the man he had formed," together with "the woman." But they rebelled. It was an earthquake of the moral world and left man's moral life in ruins. His power to be consistently very good had gone.

The world has had experiences of earthquakes at the base of the sea that cause tidal waves that engulf populations. The first man and woman broke off their communion with God in which they had been

placed, and chose a total rebellion. They wished to be gods in the sense of being independent of the one and only God, their Father. It brought on a vast tsunami of sin that inundated the moral world of all their descendants, affecting the physical world as well. But God did not abandon man to the power of death. Rather, he foretold in a mysterious way (Genesis 3:15) that evil would be conquered and that man would be lifted up after his fall. There was, at the beginning, an implicit first proclamation of the Messiah and Redeemer. The future would see the salvation of God by the hand of the Messiah. So great would this salvation be that the original fall of man would be, in a sense, a "happy fault" because – as the Church sings in the Liturgy of the Easter Vigil – it gained for us so great a Redeemer. This is the context of our Gospel passage today in which Jesus Christ, the one and only Redeemer of man, speaks of saving his sheep. *"Jesus said to the Jews, My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one"*

(John 10: 27-30). He knows each of us. While Christ was preparing in the desert for his public ministry, Satan showed him all the kingdoms of the world "in a moment of time." If the devil could do this, how easy it would have been for Christ to have seen before him, in numerous other "moments of time," you and I. He knew each of us then, and knows us now. No-one can snatch us out of his hand, for he and the Father are one, the one and only God. Jesus Christ is the One who can clean up and restore the ruins of the moral world into which we are all born. The restoration begins at our baptism when we are born again in him. It is completed with our sanctification in him.

Let us often think of that from which we have been saved, while remembering that sin is still at the door, and, indeed, has a certain entrance. The battle is joined, but we are now with Christ and he has delivered the victory for those who choose never to leave his side. If we depart from him, who is there to save us? No one else would even claim to – except those who deny that sin is of much importance or reality anyway, and that the visible, the tactile, the concrete is all that

really matters. But what really matters is the conquest of sin and the acquisition of holiness. Jesus Christ is the one who turns the tide. It is he, and he only, who can make us free. To him, then!

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.410-412

(After the Fall)



Collect Almighty ever-living God, lead us to a share in the joys of heaven, so that the humble flock may reach where the brave Shepherd has gone before. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Jesus said to the Jews, My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (John 10: 27-30)

Vocations There is a widespread need in society for advice and guidance. In the world of commerce and industry there are numerous kinds of consultants – management, personnel, even chaplaincies. In the general community there are psychiatrists, psychologists, marriage counsellors. Professional and non-professional guidance is everywhere and serves a tremendous human need. But who is the greatest guide of all? The Guide of all mankind is Christ who described himself as the Good Shepherd. In the days of our Lord, a shepherd did not drive his sheep ahead of him with dogs and vehicles. Our Lord on various occasions spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd. As we read in the Gospel, the sheep *hear his voice and follow him*. He guided his sheep by calling and leading them. In the Gospel of St John our Lord also says that he is the Sheep-gate, the gate into the fold. In calling himself the Gate he allows for no other gate at all. There is only one gate, and he is that gate. *'All others who came before me,' he says, 'are thieves and marauders.'* That is to say, unless we pass through this gate, which is Jesus himself, we shall not be safe from deadly attacks, nor will we ever gain access to the pasture of eternal life. But if souls are to pass

through this gate, there must be shepherds to guide them through it. And so we think of Christ's words, we think of the need of shepherds for Christ's sheep. First and foremost these are the ordained priests, led by the Church's chief pastor the successor of Peter, and the bishops united with him. A sheep without a shepherd may never get to the gate and pass through it. If he does, it may be the luckiest thing of all. There is, therefore, always the need for more priests. While some parts of the Church are worse off in this respect than others, everywhere there is the need of more priests, so that more and more people will be led through the gate which is Christ.

If there are to be more priests and more who shepherd the sheep by their words and example of total commitment to Christ, what must be done? Vocations to the priesthood and religious life depend considerably on the religious formation that is given to the young in their own families. The Church teaches that every home has the vocation to be a domestic church, where Christ abides. Pope Pius XII said that if mothers and fathers are giving an example of true Christian

virtue, their families will be the first seminaries and the first religious novitiates. St Therese of Lisieux came from a family of several daughters, all of whom became Religious. In the case of that family, the parents have both been canonized. Sadly, very often the parents of children do not want any of their children to be priests or religious, and do nothing to foster such a thought in the minds of their children. Pope Pius XII once said that parents should put aside their fears in this matter and by daily example of Christian life attempt to bring about this greatest honour they could ever possess. Our Lord wants all who love the Church to increase vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life by prayer, holiness of life and fidelity to the Church's teaching. If parents respect and love the priesthood and impart this respect and love to their children, vocations will flourish. Children will be open to a vocation and if they are not granted one, they will place high value on the children's own children being granted one. But if parents have little respect for the priesthood, children will grow up with the same attitude, and will scarcely value a vocation should God grant them one. The

priesthood is a high vocation, and this thought is what every parent ought impart to their children.

Let us pray for vocations to the priesthood. Every such vocation, if lived in fidelity, is a jewel in the sight of God, and an incalculable source of spiritual good, for the priest by his ordination is an *alter Christus*, another Christ.



Monday of the Fourth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rom 6: 9 Christ, having risen from the dead, dies now no more; death will no longer have dominion over him, alleluia.

Collect O God, perfect light of the blessed, by whose gift we celebrate the paschal mysteries on earth, bring us, we pray, to rejoice in the full measure of your grace for ages unending. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 42:2-3; 43:3, 4;
John 10:1-10

I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because

they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice. Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:1-10)

The Only Gate If we had to specify which is the central doctrine of the Christian Religion – in the sense of that on which all other doctrines depend, perhaps we might say it is the doctrine of the Incarnation. This doctrine declares that God became man, the Word became flesh, the Second Divine Person took unto himself a human nature, while retaining his divine nature. In it is revealed the doctrine of the Trinity, the Atonement, and so forth. Thus it was that at a certain point in

history, in a certain part of the world, there was a man walking about who was the great God on whom all depends. He was God, but not the Father, nor the Divine Spirit, each of whom are also the same one and only God. He was of a certain height, a certain build with certain features. He spoke a certain language, with a certain regional accent, with a certain tone of voice, timbre and lilt. He had a certain general manner. As *man* he had certain natural limitations, such as limits to his physical strength – it is recorded how he was fast asleep in a boat in the midst of a terrible storm. The doctrine of the Incarnation means that as man he took his place among countless other men and women spanning the ages. Now, this simple and basic fact makes acceptance of the *distinctive* claims of Jesus Christ to be somewhat difficult. He claimed to be the *only* way to union with the Father: *no-one* comes to the Father but through *me*. He is *the* Light of the world, *the* Way, Truth and Life. No one in the history of the world commanding high and enduring respect has made such exalted claims. Our Gospel today is a case in point. He claimed to be *the* gate to the pastures of heaven and God. *I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever*

came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. Well, let us imagine Jesus standing next to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Imagine him with Zoroaster, Confucius, Buddha, Mahomet. The list could go on – with each person in these groups claiming to present the *best* way to Life. But *one* of them says that *he* is the *only* way to Life, and that all others must pass through *him* to find true pasture. In the nature of the case, for any observer it is difficult to imagine and accept this when this Person *appears* to be but one of a company of several “greats” who make similar claims, though not as audacious.

We are looking at Jesus Christ as, let us say, *observers*. However, there are a few things that immediately make him *stand out*. To begin with, there is the matter of long-standing prophecies of the One who was coming. Socrates was not long-expected. Nor were Plato and Aristotle. They have had immense influence, but there was no mounting expectation of their coming,

centuries before their arrival. The same is to be said of Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster and Mahomet. They just emerged and gained their considerable intellectual or religious influence like any other great personage of history. The Hebrews, with their quasi-unique religion of the one and only God, knew of and firmly expected a great Messiah who *would come*. On *him* their hopes were pinned, and they knew that the one God had his plans for man and they would be fulfilled through the coming Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth stated that *he* was that person, and his interpretation and fulfilment of the predictions as to the Messiah was exceedingly surprising and innovative. A most striking feature of his mission was that he was the *Lamb of God* who would take away the *sin of the world* by his *sufferings and death*. Would it have ever occurred to Socrates or Aristotle, or to Zoroaster or to Mahomet, that the world was in a fundamental *state of sin* and that the most important task ahead was to take this away – to *liberate the world from sin*? But this was the declared mission of Jesus Christ, for John the Baptist said at the threshold of Christ's public ministry that he was the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. It hearkened back to the

most significant prophecies. This alone set Jesus Christ apart from all others. To say the least, it was extraordinarily original. Other things, though, cannot but be noticed. On all hands it is agreed that Jesus Christ was a man of utter virtue, and no-one takes seriously any claims that he was not, even if this does not lead to the following of him. *Can any of you convict me of sin?* was his challenge. He was also of extraordinary wisdom and indisputable courage. Aristotle fled once it became evident that the Athenians had designs on him (with the death of Alexander). Christ *embraced* his death for a unique purpose: the salvation of the world. Let us not speak of his amazing miracles – who could compare with him in this? Looking at him closely, all up *he appears as a perfect man.*

Our Gospel today presents one of the many unique claims of Jesus Christ. It is a variant of his claim to be the Saviour of the world, the world's truth Light, the Bread that has come down from heaven to give Life to the world. Everything pivots around and on Jesus Christ. Now, if this is *not* the case, this Jesus who firmly claims these

things is either deluded or deceiving. He is either a fool or a knave. He is either a cot-case or a great villain. Such claims as Jesus Christ and his countless followers have made, *if wrong*, are too grossly preposterous to allow for any other possibility. But who would say that Jesus Christ is either a knave or a fool? Our problem is that we do not seriously consider the implications of denying the unique claims of Jesus of Nazareth. So then, Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and if we believe in his name we shall



Tuesday of the Fourth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 19: 7, 6 Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to God, for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, celebrating the mysteries of the Lord's Resurrection, we may merit to receive the joy of our redemption. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ver.

Scripture today: Acts 11:19-26; Psalm 87:1b-7; John 10:22-30

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. The Jews gathered round him, saying, How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly. Jesus answered, I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them

eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (John 10:22-30)

Who Are You? The great question about Jesus of Nazareth has always been this: *Who* is he and *what* is he? Let us visualize the scene of our Gospel today. St John tells us that it is winter - so it was cold – "*and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade.*" Solomon's Colonnade was an open roofed walkway running along the Temple's eastern wall, in the Court of the Gentiles. It had magnificent double columns nearly 40 feet high, positioned at regular intervals. It was an obvious place to walk and to gather. Being winter, perhaps our Lord was briskly walking up and down with some of his disciples (including John who reports the incident), all keeping warm by the exercise and engaged in conversation both serious and light. Let us imagine ripples of gentle laughter among them, interspersed with teaching and observations by our Lord himself as they

moved along. There is no mention of any crowds, so perhaps it is relatively early before the people begin to arrive in the Temple area. The small group is approached by the "Jews," leaders consisting of the Temple aristocracy – various priests, scribes and Pharisees. The question they are about to ask is formal, so we might assume that the ones approaching Jesus are persons of consequence. Our Lord and his small group draw to a halt, and the visitors gather around him. Their question is, who are you? *"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."* All along, our Lord had been discreet about this because, on the one hand there were those who would not believe were he to tell them, and on the other there were many who would misinterpret what he said. To claim to be the Messiah would immediately evoke strong political hopes in the hearts of many. Let us notice that their question is not unlike that formulated by Satan in the wilderness just as our Lord's ministry was beginning: *"If you are the Son of God..."* The leaders here ask our Lord, *"If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."* The great question was, who are you and what is your mission?

Prior to his conception, the Angel Gabriel had told the Virgin Mary who the coming Child was and what would be his mission. He would be great and would be called the Son of the Most High, the Son of God. He would be the promised King forever. An angel had told Joseph that the child to be born of the Virgin would save his people from their sins. Twelve years later, Mary and Joseph found their Child in the Temple with the doctors of the Law, and he said to them, *Did you not know that I must be about my Father's affairs?* – a possible rendering being, *that I must be in my Father's house?* This extraordinary Youth was very aware of who he was. Throughout his public ministry more and more was being revealed about him. That is to say, he was giving more and more hints, all the while wary of the misconceptions which the people could begin to entertain about him. On one occasion he asked his disciples who the people were saying he was. It was a lead-in to his question to *them* – *who do you say I am?* He received a magnificent answer from Simon Peter, "*You are the Christ – the Messiah – the Son of the living God.*" With that, our Lord could go to work, as it were. He thereupon appointed Simon

as the Rock of his Church, and announced that he would give to him the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever Peter bound on earth would be ratified in heaven. The forces of Hell would never prevail over his Church, he promised – implying that he himself would absolutely identify with his Church. So it was that the leaders of “the Jews” now were before him, and they demanded to know who he was. It was a formal question, coming from the heads of religious life of the nation. Unhesitatingly, just as would be the case at his trial and to their amazement, our Lord gave a resounding answer: I am the Good Shepherd. I give life eternal life to all of God's sheep. God is my own Father, and the Father and I are one. Our Lord calmly and in the presence of his disciples and the leaders, in effect said that he was divine. No one in all of sacred history from Abraham to that moment had said anything like this. At that, realizing quite clearly what he was claiming, they tried to stone him.

The fundamental thing we must constantly appreciate is that the man Jesus is divine. He is human but he is not a human *person*. He is a

divine Person who took to himself a truly human nature, while being in the first instance divine. It is the mystery of mysteries that a man of a certain height, a certain bearing, with certain features, who spoke with a certain accent, who thought, spoke and acted in certain definite (and therefore limited) ways, was and is the infinite God. The second divine Person – pure Being – had become man. His mission was to set the world right before God by atoning for its sin and by pouring out the divine Spirit on the hearts of all who believe. Let us hear what our Lord says in today's Gospel and receive it into our hearts with total faith.

A Second Reflection (John 10: 22-30)

Christ's Sheep There are various ways of describing people and of categorising them. It can be by race, creed, culture, or whatever. But let us ask – ultimately in the sight of God, is there a fundamental difference between person and person that makes all the difference? Yes, if we are to go on our Lord's own words. *Some* are his sheep and some are *not*. Consider the passage from St John's Gospel, 10: 22 30. Addressing "the Jews", our Lord says "*..you do not believe,*

because you are no sheep of mine. The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me." At the last Judgement as narrated by St Matthew (chapter 25), all will be divided into two groups, *the sheep and the goats*. Now, we who are baptised have been given to Jesus by the Father. We are his sheep. What remains is that, as his sheep, we listen to Jesus and follow him. There are very many who do not know Jesus formally, and who are not baptised, but still the fundamental division can be said to stand. There are those who are his sheep and those who are not. Cardinal Newman described the conscience as the "aboriginal vicar of Christ," which is to say, the fundamental representative of Christ within human nature. If a person is intent on listening to the authentic voice of his conscience no matter what the cost, and endeavours to follow it (even if at that point mistaken in its practical judgment), that person is on the way to belonging to Jesus and being counted among his sheep. He is hearing the voice of Christ, even if that voice is muffled. St Paul persecuted the Church of God, but his readiness to follow Christ when Christ made himself

known to him showed that he was all along following his conscience, however profoundly mistaken in its practical judgment it was.

There are those who are Christ's sheep, and there are those who are not. Let us rejoice that, by the Father's choice, we are counted among his sheep, but let us be determined to follow our Good Shepherd wherever he goes.



Wednesday of the Fourth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17): 50; 22 (21): 23 I will praise you,
LORD, among the nations; I will tell of your name to my kin, alleluia.

Collect O God, life of the faithful, glory of the humble, blessedness of the just, listen kindly to the prayers of those who call on you, that they who thirst for what you generously promise may always have their fill of your plenty. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 12:24-13:5a; Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6 and 8;
John 12:44-50

Then Jesus cried out, When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he beholds me, he sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did

not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say. (John 12:44-50)

Jesus Christ I believe it can help us to appreciate the singularity of our Lord's utterances if we imagine them as coming from the mouth of a mere prophet or great leader of religion. The solemnity and deliberation with which our Lord states them in our scene today is indicated in the manner of his proclamation. We read that he "cried out" – and the Greek verb (*ekraxen*) suggests with a particularly loud voice. It is very public, for the ordinary people and for all the leaders. It is as if the entire chosen people is being informed, and the message is – believe in *me* and in whatever I say! A hostile observer might have said that he was displaying enormous temerity because his

thunderous proclamation was all about himself. The burden of his teaching was that people, all people, must have complete faith in him. When we compare this with the prophets before him, this is a very different emphasis. The prophets proclaimed a message from God who had sent them to prophesy, and while they expected all to believe they had received a true prophetic call, they themselves were not at the forefront of the message. The word of God was not about them. Not so with Jesus of Nazareth. The word he proclaimed was very largely about himself. His prophetic message, proclaimed before all in a loud voice, was that the one who looked on him looked on the One who sent him. The one who believed in him believed in the One who sent him, and the One who sent him was God, *his own Father*. These are extraordinary statements that had no precedent. The prophets spoke of their being called from their home and their work to act as prophets of God. But Jesus speaks of having come "into the world." He was sent "into the world" by the Father, and he who sees him, Jesus, sees the One who sent him. What prophet ever said such a thing, or what serious leader of the religions of man? Mahomet never said that he

came "into the world," and that to look at and believe in him was to look at and believe in Allah. We might say that this Gospel scene in which Jesus was the protagonist was an utterly unique performance, and a colossal charade if they were untrue.

The burden of our Lord's words in our passage today is, Believe in me and you will be in the light! If you *refuse* to believe in me, you will be judged and condemned on the last day. So our stand with regard to the person of Jesus Christ will have eternal consequences. *"As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day"* (John 12:44-50). Our Lord's warning has an immense reach, for the prophets did not speak of the rejection of their words as bringing a condemnation on the last day. Jesus Christ transcends the prophets, while standing in their line. He transcends every other religious leader of all time. Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster, Mahomet, the leaders of thought such as

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle – none soared to the heights of Christ's claims and the credibility he gave to them. His holiness is unmatched, his redemptive mission unique, his claims without parallel, and his credentials clear. The one who, in the company of others, calls Jesus Christ *deluded* is an embarrassment. The one who calls him a *hoax and a trickster* cannot get a serious hearing. More commonly, the answer of the objector is to call into question *the witnesses*, or the *manuscripts* reporting their accounts. The witnesses made it up. The chief priests, St Matthew tells us, had the soldiers spread the story that while they were asleep the disciples came and stole the body away – and as St Augustine retorts, how would the soldiers have known if they were asleep? Many sceptics maintain that St Paul invented much of Christianity. Islam has it that Jesus of Nazareth was too holy to have been crucified. He did not die on the cross at all, and therefore he could not have risen from the dead. But all these evasions of the historical record are gratuitous and without evidence. The facts of the case are indeed wondrous, but it is clear that they are facts. The fact presented

in our Gospel today is our Lord's revelation of his Person and authority. He is the divine Son of the eternal Father who sent him.

Let us place ourselves in the presence of Jesus Christ as he proclaims the revelation of his own divine Person and his union with the Father who sent him. If we believe in him we believe in the Father who sent him. In looking on him, we are looking on the Father who sent him. He is the Light of the world, and in accepting his word we are saved from ultimate darkness, and from condemnation at the last day. Let us live by his word, shaping our whole lives accordingly.

A Second Reflection: (Acts 12:24-13:5)

Listen to The Spirit Years back it was said that the Holy Spirit is the hidden Person of the Blessed Trinity. There is a sense in which this is correct, but one of the striking features of, for instance, the *Acts of the Apostles*, is the clarity of its presentation of the Person of the Holy Spirit. Throughout the entire Scriptures, Old Testament as well as New, there are references to the action of the Holy Spirit. The revelation of

his *Personhood* is gradual, and his action and presence in the Gospels is clear. But with the Acts of the Apostles, his action becomes striking. For instance, in our first reading for today (Acts 12:24-13:5) the Holy Spirit is openly at work and being heard in the Church in Antioch. *He directs* that Saul and Barnabas be set apart for a mission, and it is He who sends them on it. The Church of Antioch was open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and listening responsively to his inspirations. The example of the Christians at Antioch shows that it is possible to be very aware of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The task is to learn to be aware of it.

One modern saint, St Josemaria Escriva, was told by his spiritual director in the early years of his priesthood (his spiritual director was Father Sanchez, a Jesuit) to take great care always to listen to the Holy Spirit. St Josemaria took that advice to heart and made it his life long practice. Let us take that advice to heart ourselves. But it is something to be learned – with the help of the same divine Spirit. We must learn to listen to Him who is our guide and our sanctifier, the One

who enables us to bear witness to Christ, just as he enabled Paul and Barnabas.



Thursday of the Fourth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67): 8-9, 20 O God, when you went forth before your people, marching with them and living among them, the earth trembled, heavens poured down rain, alleluia.

Collect O God, who restore human nature to yet greater dignity than at its beginnings, look upon the amazing mystery of your loving kindness, and in those you have chosen to make new through the wonder of rebirth may you preserve the gifts of your enduring grace and blessing. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 13:13-25; Psalm 89:2 3, 21-22, 25 and 27;
John 13:16-20

Jesus said, I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. I am not referring to

all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfil the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.' I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am. I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me. (John 13:16-20)

The Last Supper Our scene today from the Gospel of St John follows Christ's washing of the feet, including the feet of his betrayer. There are interesting things to notice about St John's account of the Last Supper. To begin with, it is by far the longest account of it among the four Gospels. St Matthew devotes some eleven verses to the Supper (26: 20-30), during which he narrates the institution of the Eucharist. St Mark devotes some eight verses to it (14: 18-26), and it too includes the institution of the Eucharist. St Luke gives twenty four verses to it, which is more than twice as much as Matthew, and three times as much as Mark. It includes the Eucharist (22: 14-38). The Eucharist (approximately four verses in each Gospel) is narrated within

the context of Christ's sorrowful prediction of his coming Passion and his betrayal by Judas. Luke has more of Christ's instruction to the Apostles on humble service, their high destiny, and their coming crisis during the Passion. But none of the three synoptic Gospels compare with John's account in the copiousness of Christ's teaching. Inasmuch as each of the three synoptic Gospels included the essential matter which was the institution of the Eucharist, and inasmuch as all knew that it was at the Last Supper that the Eucharist was instituted (for the Eucharist was its living Memorial), John passes over that and gives his space to Christ's teaching and prayer. I suppose one could even say that the very *brevity* of the accounts of the Last Supper in the three first Gospels may lead some (uninstructed) readers to miss, somewhat, its importance. But John devotes nearly a fifth of his Gospel to the Last Supper. One of the features of the Gospel of St John is that he takes one or two incidents, and then gives our Lord's extensive teaching. Chapter 6 is given over to the doctrine of the Eucharist – far more than in any other Gospel. He also lets us know that this copious

teaching was given *publicly*. Well, this pattern of *fulsome teaching* is especially present in his account of the Last Supper.

St John looks back to the great event on the night Jesus was betrayed, and vividly remembers our Lord's instructions to those who constituted his Church in embryo. He was giving them a *magna carta*, as it were, of how they were to guide his Church and what it means to be a disciple. Christians celebrated the Eucharist, of course, living the Church's Tradition on the point, and reading the account of it in the earlier gospels. Those Gospel verses narrating the Eucharist were heard in the regular celebration of the Eucharist. But Christ had also spoken at length of discipleship and life in the Church, and we have a specimen of his teaching in our Gospel passage today (John 13:16-20). Our Lord has just acted towards his disciples as a slave would act towards his master: he has bent down and washed the feet of each – even though he was their Master and their Lord, as he acknowledged minutes later. They were told to remember his example, and wash each others' feet. Our Lord is speaking to those who will sit on the twelve thrones

and judge the twelve tribes of Israel, and he insists that their greatness must consist in humble service. His entire life was encapsulated in that symbolic action of the washing, and he asked that our lives be expressed in similar fashion. The life of the Church and her members was to be like that of her Lord – *"no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."* We must ever have before us the image and the example of Jesus Christ who humbled himself and became as we are, and lowlier still, even to death on the Cross. But across the ages there is a terrible anomaly among Christ's disciples. There are those who are faithful, and there are those who are unfaithful. Indeed, there are those who turn against Christ. There was a Judas at the Last Supper, and there will be Judases till the end of time: *"I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfil the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me'."* All our lives let us, as John the Evangelist did, return to the thought of the Last Supper.

A very significant element present in St John's Gospel is our Lord's use of the name of Yahweh God in referring to *himself*. St John means to be very clear about our Lord. He is the "I AM" of the Scriptures. "*Before Abraham ever was,*" our Lord said to the leaders of the Jews, "*I am (ego eimi).*" So too he says to the Twelve during the Last Supper, "*I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am (ego eimi).*" He is alluding to his divinity, and stressing the absolute necessity of accepting it. Let us then take our stand with Jesus Christ, true God and true man, and resolve to live in imitation of him both within the Church and in our daily life in the world.

A Second Reflection: (Acts 13:13-25)

The One Saviour One of the dangers to Christian belief is the assumption, so widespread in society, that Jesus is great, yes, but basically just one of many who are great, and not really unique nor indispensable to the human race. In our world and society there are many religions, all with their numerous deeply convinced

believers. Living in such a cultural environment, we ourselves can come to accept the common premise that there are many ways to God or to the Absolute, each of which is as valid as the next. In the passage from the Acts of the Apostles for today (13: 13-25) St Paul, being invited to address the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia, speaks of *Jesus as the culmination* of all that God had been preparing for in the history of his saving work. He was the *fulfilment of all that God had promised*, of whom John the Baptist had said that he was not worthy to undo his sandal strap. "To keep his promise, God has raised up for Israel one of David's descendants, Jesus, as Saviour.."

If we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world as Jesus said we are to be, we must preserve a lively conviction that Jesus is the Saviour, the one and only Saviour, of the world. He is the image of the Father and the only way to him. In our respectful dialogue with the religions of man, this is our message.



Friday of the Fourth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5: 9-10 You have redeemed us, Lord, by your Blood, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us into a kingdom, priests for our God, alleluia.

Collect O God, author of our freedom and of our salvation, listen to the voice of our pleading and grant that those you have redeemed by the shedding of your Son's Blood may have life through you and, under your protection, rejoice for ever unharmed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 13:26-33; Psalm 2:6-11ab; John 14:1-6

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where

I am going. Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way? Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:1-6)

The Only Way One of the greatest acquisitions of Western thought and culture has been the recognition of human rights. Power over others must not be regarded as simply a prize for the strongest, but as a gift to be put to the service of human beings who have *rights*. Our Lord said to Pontius Pilate that he would have no power over him at all, had it not been given to him from above. Power is a responsibility to be exercised in the service of man's rights, and these are grounded in his dignity as a human being. "*That is why,*" our Lord continued, "*the ones who handed me over to you bear the greater guilt.*" A fundamental human right – indeed the most fundamental of all – is the right to seek and serve God according to one's best lights, provided the legitimate rights of others are not thereby disregarded. This recognition of the *right to freedom of religious conviction and inquiry* and practice has

brought with it, though, a philosophical pitfall that is widespread in Western culture. It is the tendency to think that there is no religious error, or rather, that there is no objective truth *in religion*. While we readily grant the right of others to think and live as they please in religion, typically we take the next step of thinking that religious belief is purely subjective. It involves little grasp of objective reality, but is, rather, a reflection of personal preference or religious and cultural conditioning. This means that though the right to think as one pleases in religion is allowed, paradoxically the right to think that there is *objective truth* and error in religion is *not* allowed. This is deemed to be intolerant, and so it is considered intolerable. The positive gain of respect for human rights has in fact brought with it the tendency to think that objective truth in religion is a phantom or a matter of indifference. But of course, this position is an assumption. Further, it is irreconcilable with Christianity which makes firm claims about truth and error.

In his religions, man aims for contact with the Beyond, with the powers above who can help him. He aims at communion with what we might call the Ultimate – however this is imagined or conceived among the peoples. It would be impossible to enumerate or catalogue in their entirety the religions of man – although in the last century or more we have gone a long way in that direction. But what would the student of religions say of the claim of one of them that it is the *only* way to the Ultimate? When faced with the plethora of sincere attempts to seek God or the gods, the claim would seem to be preposterous and scarcely to be taken seriously. In fact, such a claim is not common because it is so obviously seems to be unreasonable. If anything, the tendency of the detached observer is, as mentioned above, to think that *none* of the religions of man attain the final reality of things. They satisfy and express his longings, and that is all. But ah! there is one great exception. In our Gospel today, Jesus of Nazareth makes a breathtaking claim about the religion of man. He is the Way. Christianity claims to have the way to attain the Ultimate reality – and indeed, that it is the only way. That Way is Christ. It is extraordinary and seemingly

preposterous, but so it be it. In our Gospel today, our Lord calmly says that he is going to prepare us a place in his own Father's House. He continues, *"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way? Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:1-6). He, Jesus Christ, is the way to the Father; he is the truth of the Father and he is the life of the Father. Seeing him, one sees the Father. Moreover, he is the only way, for no-one comes to the Father except through him. No one can reach God in truth and in fact but by means of Jesus Christ. So if the Buddhist, the Muslim, the man of traditional religion, or the atheist, attain to heaven (as we hope he will), in fact this has only been through Jesus Christ. Christ has got him there.

This is a hard saying for the modern ear. But it in no way is disrespectful of other religions, nor does it set aside their great

value. Jesus Christ is the Word of God. Through him *all things were made*. Therefore *he is present* in all of creation, be it interior or exterior to man. Even if a person fails to learn specifically of Jesus Christ or has little opportunity of taking him seriously, Christ's presence in creation as the Word will afford him the means of a form of contact with him who is the way to the Father – even if this form is implicit. Cardinal Newman called the conscience of man the "aboriginal vicar of Christ," and there is a long tradition in English Christian thought that considers nature to be the voice of God. There is a sense in which there is a universal revelation, but passing by that route will be more difficult because of the fall of man. All of this is a further matter. Our point today is the unique character and role of Jesus Christ for all of mankind. In absolute terms, he is the only way to the Father. Let us choose him, then!

A Second Reflection: (John 14:1-6)

Peace in Trouble One of the widespread problems of our time is that of depression, even among the young, who are traditionally noted for

their optimism and idealism. There have been reports of a sharp increase among the young in the use of antidepressants. It is possible that people too readily allow themselves to sink into depression and emotional trouble. It is notable how often our Lord *tells* his disciples *not* to be troubled, not to be afraid. His directive is in the manner of a *command*. Inasmuch as he himself was at times troubled, and profoundly so, he obviously means that we are *not to allow ourselves* to be troubled as one who has nothing secure to rely on. Our Lord's peace and indomitable strength in the midst of trouble came from the thought of his Father and his Father's will. At the Last Supper our Lord says to his disciples: "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still and trust in me*"(John 14:1). So, even if we are depressed and are unable to overcome it, even if we cannot cope despite our genuine efforts, we are to trust in God still, and in Jesus. Jesus is our stay in times of trouble, Jesus and our homeland that is ahead of us. "*I am going to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you with me; so that where I am, you may be too.*"

Our final port is always in sight, because Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We reach the Father through him (John 14:1-6). If we stay with him, we shall most certainly arrive.

Saturday of the Fourth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. 1 Pt 2: 9 O chosen people, proclaim the mighty works of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light, alleluia.

Collect O God, who in the celebration of Easter graciously give to the world the healing of heavenly remedies, show benevolence to your Church, that our present observance may benefit us for eternal life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 13: 44-52; Psalm 98:1-4; John 14:7-14

Jesus said to his disciples, If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen

him. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Jesus answered: Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. (John 14: 7-14)

He is Divine As St John presents it, Jesus made extraordinary and absolutely unprecedented statements about himself quite publicly, before the crowds and before the religious leaders. For instance, following his dramatic cleansing of the Temple, he told the leaders that

"*Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again*" (2:19) – referring to his resurrection from the dead. In the synagogue of Capernaum he told the assembled congregation, among whom were many of his disciples, that they must eat his flesh as real food, and drink his blood as real drink, if they were to live. As a result of this announcement he lost many of his disciples (6:67). He stated he was the Light of the world and the Good Shepherd. Especially noteworthy was his way of speaking about God and his relationship with God. God was his own personal, natural Father. He was literally God's own natural Son, and God had sent him and was always with him. He, Jesus, never sinned – he always did what pleased his Father, and he challenged his enemies to convict him of any sin. "What do you claim to be?" they asked him (8:54). Our Lord's reply to this pivotal question was unheard of in the history of God's chosen people and in the inspired writings, and it was uttered in the Temple itself: "*Believe me, before ever Abraham came to be, I am*" (8:58). This was too much, and they took up stones in order to stone him. On another occasion, again in the Temple, he declared before the leaders that *he and the Father were one*

(10:30). On this occasion again, "the Jews" took up stones in order to stone him. Christ proceeded to engage them in debate about it, and affirmed that "*the Father is in me, and I am in the Father*" (10:38). They sought forthwith to arrest him, but once again he escaped. Before raising Lazarus from the dead he told Martha that he was the Resurrection and the Life. The one who believed in him, though he were to die, would live forever (11:25). What did all these extraordinary statements, supported by extraordinary miracles, and by One who was manifestly so holy, indicate? It indicated that he was divine.

It is now the night of his betrayal, the night before he was to die. He is at the most solemn Supper of his life and he is bequeathing to his beloved disciples the most precious of his gifts. That gift is what would come to be called the Holy Eucharist, and the ministerial priesthood which would be the means of its continuance. He is also, in John's account, giving to them his most precious of teachings, revealing to them who he is and who God his own Father is. As we know

especially from John's Gospel, in its essential lines the doctrine of his own divinity had been revealed before, and publicly, and it would be in witness to this revealed truth that he would on the morrow be going to his terrible death. But here with his disciples, Christ tells them more and at greater depth, while retaining his remarkable simplicity of expression. *"If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."* Christ had repeatedly referred to his Father as the object of his love, veneration and obedience, and had said that the Father is greater than he – precisely because, obviously, he is "the Father." Here, though, our Lord tells the disciples that *they now know the Father and can see him*. This was a remarkable utterance, and Philip responded with the obvious question: Lord we do not see the Father. You say we see him, but how is this? We don't see him, so show him to us. But Christ had just formally said that they already do see him and that they already do know him. *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not*

just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work" (John 14: 7-14). How simple are our Lord's words in describing such an ineffable mystery! The Father's face, we might say, is Jesus Christ. While the two are distinct *Persons* – one is the Father and the other is the Son – there is another sense in which they are absolutely one. Each separately is the same one divine *Being*, Yahweh the Lord God. Each is so united to the other, as to be "in" the other, and what the one is doing, the other is doing.

If there is one thing that is luminously clear in our Gospel passage today, it is that Jesus Christ is very much a man. We see this even from the way his disciples speak and interact with him. There is no hesitation with questions, and their relationship with our Lord is direct and familiar. He is their Master and Lord, but their dear Friend too. However, he reveals to them that he, Jesus, is the one God, just as his Father is the one God. If they wish to know the Father, they are to look on *him*. When the Father reveals himself, what people see is his Son, Jesus – but the two are distinct divine Persons. Each is *in* the other

– and it means that if we are in Jesus by grace, then likewise we are in the Father. Let us resolve to live in union with Jesus, for by doing this we live in union with God, Father, Son and Spirit.

A Second Reflection: (Acts 13:44-52)

The Heart of Man One of the saddest mysteries of life is the adverse reaction that is possible towards goodness, and indeed towards God himself. We think of the rebellion of some of the angels, or the hostility that some felt towards Jesus, whom to see is to see the Father. In Acts 13:44-52 there is portrayed the hostile reaction of some Jews towards the preaching of Paul and Barnabas. We read that this was due to their jealousy. The human heart is very capable of resisting the good. Now, we can think of all this as something 'out there', and not involving ourselves. On the contrary, it affects ourselves profoundly. Let each of us consider our response to the call to

goodness that our conscience presents to us with every day. Why has not our response to this call been more wholehearted? This reluctance towards goodness is rooted in our own hearts also. It is not something "out there."

We must confront this sinfulness that characterises our condition. It must be recognised and gradually overcome with prayer, self denial and above all the grace of the Holy Spirit available to us in the Sacraments and in the life of the Church. As we think of the hostility towards God and Christ that Scripture portrays time and again, let us take it as reminding us of our own hearts and of the work that lies ahead of us.



Fifth Sunday of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 98 (97): 1-2 O sing a new song to the Lord, for he has worked wonders; in the sight of the nations he has shown his deliverance, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, constantly accomplish the Paschal Mystery within us, that those you were pleased to make new in Holy Baptism may, under your protective care, bear much fruit and come to the joys of life eternal. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 14:21-27; Psalm 144; Apocalypse 21:1-5;

John 13:31-35

When he was gone, Jesus said, Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the

Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13: 31-35)

Love and the Eucharist

For many years the epicentre of world strife has been the Middle East, and in particular that between Israel and the Palestinians. Within that geographical setting, Islam and Judaism are in continual conflict. Many Muslims – though not all – are hostile to Jews, and many Jews – though not all – are hostile to Muslims. A new factor has emerged – the strife between factions and sects of Muslims themselves – each appealing to the *Koran* and to Allah. As in so many situations in human history, those of opposite convictions take their stand on "the truth" (as they understand it). This stand is enforced on others with all the rigour at their command, and the result is the denial of human rights with all its social and political turmoil. This, we might even say, is bearing witness to "the truth" in a spirit of contempt for others. In fact, it is scarcely the spirit of truth at all. Squeezed

within all the strife are the Christians. It has been said that a complaint against the Christians in the Middle East is that they are too detached, too uncommitted to the cause. That is to say, they are not firmly on one side or the other of the strife. They just talk of peace. This is a complaint by some who are active in the hostilities, and indeed it could be said to refer to the typically Christian stance. I have read Christian leaders in the area declare that they see the Christian presence as a bridge and as an agent of harmony. What this reminds us of is that while the Christian takes his stand on the truth, he does not regard this as a complete description of his stand. His ideal – even if he often fails to attain it – is to take his stand on the truth, but *in a spirit of Christ-like love*. On all hands, the absolute significance of the truth is accepted. Each side of the conflict intends standing for "the truth." Apart from the question of what "the truth" is, what is consistently forgotten is the divine law of love. The same defect often prevails in countries of peace. Probably the greatest shaper of culture and opinion in modern democratic society is the media, and it prides itself on its freedom to publish "the truth." All too often it forgets the

law of love and so what is called "the truth," which is often falsehood, is trumpeted before all with little concern for the loss of reputation and harm flowing in its wake.

Our Lord came among us to reveal the truth about himself and his saving mission. His revelation of this divine truth brought down upon himself a tremendous persecution. In our Gospel passage today our Lord is giving his parting words to his disciples before going to meet his final moment of bearing witness to the truth. They will have the mission of bearing witness to his truth to the ends of the earth, but here, in his final meeting with them before going forth to suffer and to die, *he speaks to them of love*. They are to love as he has loved. *"I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"* (John 13: 31-35). It is by their love that all men will know that they are his disciples. It is by our love that people will know that we are Christians. So much is this so, and so well known is it, that in

popular language the word "Christian" often means nothing other than love and kindness, with no reference to the truth of Christ. What the Christian is called to do is to bear witness to the truth of Christ *in a spirit of love* – the love of Christ. Our witness ought be a reflection of Christ's witness, and, just as Christ was consumed with love for men in the entire witness of his life, so ought we, in imitation of our divine Master. Now – and this brings us to a fundamental matter – we can only hope to do this by being united in a daily and living way with the risen Jesus, from whom has come the command to love as he loves us. This union with Jesus is nourished above all by the faith-filled reception of Holy Communion. Holy Communion increases our union with Christ and with his Church. It preserves and renews the life of grace received at our Baptism and Confirmation, and makes us grow in love for our neighbour. It strengthens us in charity and helps us in our fight against sin. Inasmuch as the Eucharist is Christ himself, it fills us with all heavenly blessings. Most of all, it nourishes in us the capacity to bear witness to the truth in a spirit of love.

If we aspire to bear witness to and live according to the truth, we must do so in love. This means we must love others with the *love of Christ*. But to do this we need to live in union with Christ, and for this we ought receive the Holy Eucharist regularly and with truly pious dispositions. In Holy Communion we commune with Christ and receive from him a greater share in his own divine life. This divine life is above all the life of love. God is love, St John tells us in his Letter. In entering into union with Jesus at Holy Communion, we receive the capacity to love as he loves. Let us love the Holy Eucharist then, and make it the summit and source of our Christian life.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1822-1829 (Charity), no.1396-1401 (The Eucharist and unity)

A Second Reflection: (Apocalypse 21:1-5)

Christ and the Church There is a tendency to distinguish sharply between Christ and his Church, and to separate the two. It is asserted that while there is nothing to be said against Christ, there is much to be said against the Church – which, of course is true in a sense. But then the conclusion drawn is, love Christ, but not the Church. The Church is rejected in the name of Christ. But this is not in accord with the teaching of Scripture on Christ and on the Church. Our Lord refers to himself in the Gospels as the Bridegroom. In fact, St John the Baptist referred to our Lord as the Bridegroom, and to himself as the Bridegroom's friend. In the Old Testament God is spoken of by the prophet Hosea as the Husband of his chosen people. Our Lord described himself as the Bridegroom, and therefore the Church is his bride. In the second reading (Apocalypse 21:1 5) the Church is described as the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down from heaven – and dressed as a bride for her husband. Jerusalem is a symbol of God's chosen people, and it is clothed as his spouse. On another

occasion our Lord said that in God's plan a husband and wife become one body. If the Church, then, is Christ's bride, she is also, in biblical language, his body. The two are united, as one body. Inasmuch as St Paul describes the husband as the head of his wife, so then Christ is the head of his body the Church. These images describing the relationship between Christ and his Church are deeply related: by the gift of the Spirit, the Church is the bride and the body of Christ, and he is the Church's Bridegroom and Head. So then as we heard in the second reading, the Church is the holy city, the new Jerusalem, built and gathered together by the Lord Jesus, and dressed as a bride for her husband and head.

Such is the way the Scriptures describe the Church and her marvellous union with Christ. The meaning of the Church is to be found in this union. In God's eternal plan, it is in the Church that man attains union with God. Christ said that whatever you do to the least of these brothers of mine, you do to me. He said this above all of his Church, and of the Church's members. Whatever we do to the Church

we do to Christ, for the Church is Christ's body and spouse. Just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, so should we love and serve the Church. For it is in the Church – which is to say, Christ's Catholic Church – as the passage from the Apocalypse says, that God lives among men. It is there that God is with us. So we serve God and give him glory by bringing the Church to others and others into the Church. The most direct means of contact and union with God is through being a member of Christ's Catholic Church, provided one lives one's life in a way consistent with this membership. The ultimate purpose of this marvellous plan of God – this mystery of the Church hidden from all ages and now revealed to us – the ultimate purpose of the Church and of being a member of the Church, is the glory of God. God is glorified through the holiness of his children. And what does this holiness consist in that gives such glory to God? It consists in loving Christ and being ever ready to do his will. It is this which should distinguish the life of the Church and her children. The more the Church gives glory to Christ her head and spouse by living a holy life, the more God is glorified. That should be our life's aim: to think, to

speak and to act in such a way that the Lord Jesus is honoured and glorified. Thus will God be glorified.

In the first reading (Acts 14:21-27) we see the infant Church spreading the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. Let us all be characterised by this apostolic zeal. Let us all desire to give glory to God by our love for Christ and his teaching as it is taught by his bride the Church. Let each of us desire to bring Christ to others who do not know him. Thus will we glorify Christ, and in him God will be glorified. This is the meaning of the Catholic Church, Christ's spouse and body.



Monday of the Fifth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon The Good Shepherd has risen, who laid down his life for his sheep and willingly died for his flock, alleluia.

Collect May your right hand, O Lord, we pray, encompass your family with perpetual help, so that, defended from all wickedness by the Resurrection of your Only Begotten Son, we may make our way by means of your heavenly gifts. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 14:5-18; Psalm 113b; John 14:21-26

Jesus said to his disciples, Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world? Jesus replied, If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him

and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:21-26)

Love As is well understood, the Bible is a collection of scrolls and parchments known by the Judaeo-Christian world to be inspired by God. The list (or “canon”) of these small “books” (which were written at different times from the second millennium BC to the first century AD) varied among religious groupings within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The Samaritans and the Sadducees accepted the Torah (the five “books of Moses”) – with their own interpretations, of course. The Pharisees accepted the Torah, and the prophets and others as well – with their own sources of interpretation. The Ethiopian Jews have their “canon”. There is no scholarly consensus on when the Rabbinical Hebrew “canon” (or approved list) was set. But we can say that the

official “canon” *attributed* to the hypothetical Rabbinical Council of Jamnia came to be that of the Masoretic text with its 24 books. This did not square with, say, the Greek Septuagint which the Christian Church accepted as representing the “canon” of the Old Testament. All this shows, incidentally, the role of Tradition in the official use and sanctioning of the Old Testament. Much could be said of the formation of the Christian “canon” (including the New Testament). The Protestant Churches of the Reformation chose to opt for the Hebrew Canon of the Old Testament, while the Council of Trent, consistent with Catholic tradition, upheld St Jerome’s Vulgate with its inspired books. Luther had his reservations about the Letters of James and Jude. Apart from the matter of the *canon* of the inspired books, a more serious matter was the question of how to *interpret* them. We cannot go into this, except to observe that Jesus of Nazareth set forth *himself* as the One about whom the Scriptures wrote, and the One who is the interpretative Key to them all. The New Testament, especially the Gospels, present Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. All of Scripture points to him, and he in turn

lights up the whole of Scripture. But of course, he himself, as presented in the Scriptures, is to be approached with the mind of the Church his body and creation. All this having been said, let us ask this question: *What is the Bible about?* – granted that it leads to the person of Christ and is to be understood in the light of him. The Bible is about the *Covenant* which God planned and established with his Chosen People, a *Covenant* definitively brought to its fulfilment by Christ. This Covenant portrayed in Scripture is something well beyond a treaty. Its model is that of a *family* or *marriage*. God is the Bridegroom and Husband. Israel is his bride.

What the Scriptures (and the divinely-guided Tradition) reveal is that the Creator and Father of all planned a marriage between himself and humanity. He wished us to have a most distinctively *personal* relationship with him. He, in Christ his Son, was the *Bridegroom*, and we his chosen people (destined to include all the nations) was to be his *bride*. The great God who is our Ruler and Judge sought our heartfelt *friendship*. He *loved* us, and wished us to *love him* in a shared

communion of life. This was to be the definitive Covenant between God and us his people – raised to the dignity of being *members of his family* and sharing in his divine life. He treats us as having the dignity of being sought by him for our personal love. We have the vocation to *love* God with all our heart, the test of this love being our obedience to his commands. All this brings us to our Gospel today, in which our Lord speaks of the love for him that he expects of us, and of the result of this love – which is his abiding with us for ever. *Jesus said to his disciples, Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.* The one who loves Jesus and obeys his commands is the one to whom Jesus will show himself. He will possess Jesus in a special way – this is the distinctive thing about the Christian religion. There will be an indwelling of the Triune God in the heart of the one who loves Jesus. *If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.... All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in*

my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. This possession of the human heart by the love of the living risen Jesus across the ages is unique. In General Bertrand's *Memoirs* of Napoleon in his last months at St Helena, he tells us that the ex-emperor had this to say: *Across a chasm of eighteen hundred years, Jesus Christ makes a demand which is beyond all others difficult to satisfy; He asks for that which a philosopher may often seek in vain at the hands of his friends, or a father of his children, or a bride of her spouse, or a man of his brother. He asks for the human heart; He will have it entirely to Himself. He demands it unconditionally; and forthwith His demand is granted.* Bonaparte's words are a variant of the point being made here: *God loves us and wants our love.*

God wants us to be his *friends*. Where ought we start in gaining a personal knowledge of this? We start with seeking to know the love of God for *us*, for *me*, in Jesus Christ. We must meditate prayerfully on this daily, asking for the grace to know the great truth expressed by St Paul when he said, *Christ loved me and gave himself up for me.* John

put it differently in his Letter when he wrote that *this is the love I mean, not our love for God but his love for us*. This love for us is unconditional in the face of our misery – it is merciful. God shows himself especially in his mercy. He is, as the Scriptures explain, a God rich in mercy. Let us be devoted to the Divine Mercy, then, striving to know it as shown to us, and striving in our turn to show it to others.



Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 19: 5; 12: 10 Sing praise to our God, all you who fear God, both small and great, for now salvation and strength have come, and the power of his Christ, alleluia.

Collect O God, who restore us to eternal life in the Resurrection of Christ, grant your people constancy in faith and hope, that we may never doubt the promises of which we have learned from you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 14:19-28; Psalm 145:10-13ab, 21;
 John 14:27-31a

Jesus said to his disciples, Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you

now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. I will not speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me, but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me. (John 14:27-31a)

Suffering In view of his altogether peerless character and the works he performed, the most striking feature of the life of Christ is his ignominious death. He began with the crowds following him in great numbers – and at one point they wanted to make him their *king*. But he was not deceived. Throughout his public ministry there was a growing rejection and hostility, especially by the Temple aristocracy, to what he was saying and doing. This was manifest to his own disciples, and it just may have been a factor in the abandonment of our Lord by many of them when, at Capernaum, he taught the doctrine of the Eucharist. Some may have judged that he was not going to prevail anyway, so what was the point of their staying with him, especially after hearing that they were expected to eat his flesh and drink his

blood. Satan was very busy, and we read at the end of the sixth chapter of John that Satan had gained a firm foothold within the very circle of the Twelve. Our Lord told the Twelve that one of them was a devil, even though he had chosen all twelve of them. He had given such proofs of his claims, and had shown that every heavenly blessing was available in him. Yet he could see that he was not going to gain the nation and its leaders. The rejection was growing in intensity and, at the last, this rejection would win out. Thus he ended his days without honour – meaning by this, without the honour of those who mattered in the nation. He died as if a criminal and among criminals, enduring the humiliation of his innocence and his rights being recognized by the Roman governor but not vindicated by him. Rather, for the governor's own peace of mind he was handed over to the mob and its ringleaders for a lynching. Crucifixion was the most degrading of deaths – one that was even prohibited for Roman citizens. It seems to have taken a long time for Christians to begin depicting Christ nailed on the cross. In a word, he was "unsuccessful," and his followers were left devastated. Christ knew that this would be his course. It was no

surprise to him. Now, what does Christ say in the face of this? He says, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled and afraid.*"

Christ said that the Scriptures had foretold all this as being part and parcel of his mission. Indeed, his suffering and his terrible death were an essential part of it, and its most important part. His business was to take away the sin of the world and to sanctify the world with the gift of a share in his own Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Mysteriously, the way forward to this goal was obedience in the midst of terrible rejection and suffering. It was necessary for the Son of Man to suffer in order to enter his glory, and he taught his disciples that this was the path for all who aspire to follow him. They too had to drink his chalice. It is a lesson constantly repeated in the life and history of the Church, and every time it is uttered, it remains still a hard saying. The Christian has to learn that lesson, and he must not be troubled or afraid when he sees persecution coming or actually upon him. Nor must he be troubled or afraid when he sees persecution engulfing the most prominent of Christ's disciples. The prince of this

world is coming, our Lord said – at the threshold of his own Passion and Death. We must presume that there is a similar demonic approach when Christ's closest disciples have the most to suffer, especially from the world. For instance, especially noteworthy in my own living memory have been the attacks on the reigning Pope of the time. Long after his holy life and death, Pope Pius XII was vilified and misrepresented. Pope Paul VI, now beatified and whose Cause for Canonization is proceeding, was virulently attacked by the world's media, especially after he issued his condemnation of artificial contraception in his famous Encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. Pope John Paul II was frequently attacked. Pope Benedict XVI, so eminent in quality and accomplishments, was attacked time and again. Now, this is to be expected in much of history because Christ is the paradigm. Our Lord was attacked for violation of received religious practices, for blasphemy in his claims about himself, and for being in league with Satan. He set the direction that was to be expected for the Church, and he said, *Do not let your hearts be troubled and afraid*.

As a matter of fact, suffering and humiliation is the school of sanctity. When we see the Vicar of Christ on earth being attacked and humiliated, when we think of the sufferings which any true follower of Christ must endure, let us think of our Lord's words in today's Gospel (John 14: 27-31a). Our hearts must not be troubled. We ought pray for those who suffer, realizing, though, that their sufferings are a sign of Christ's special love for them. They are being drawn along the same path as Christ himself. Suffering and humiliation is Christ's school of sanctity. Let us pray that this suffering bears the fruit intended by God for the Church and the world.

A Second Reflection (Acts 14:19-28)

Suffering Paul and his friends were stoned, dragged outside the town, and generally persecuted (Acts 14:19-28). But he and they were never overcome by these sufferings endured in the service of Christ and the Gospel. They had a remarkable resilience, forever getting up and continuing their mission with an unceasing freshness. What was the key to this perseverance in the work they had been given? One key to it

was surely their very *attitude to suffering*, the suffering with which they were repeatedly afflicted. They saw that it had great *meaning and value*. They understood and publicly said that suffering was necessary: "*We all have to experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God.*" In this they were echoing our Lord who said that the Messiah had to suffer to enter into his glory. So they saw suffering (as connected with the doing of God's will as most fruitful and as a privileged moment of union with Christ the Redeemer. Thus suffering never discouraged but only encouraged them.

Let us pray for the grace to appreciate suffering in this light. If we have a truly Christ-like attitude to suffering, by the grace of God suffering will transform our lives.



Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 71 (70): 8, 23 Let my mouth be filled with your praise, that I may sing aloud; my lips shall shout for joy, when I sing to you, alleluia.

Collect O God, restorer and lover of innocence, direct the hearts of your servants towards yourself, that those you have set free from the darkness of unbelief may never stray from the light of your truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 15:1-6; Psalm 122:1-5; John 15:1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the Vinedresser. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the

vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15: 1-8)

Union It is a wondrous and ever-fascinating thought that in a certain locality and at a certain point of history, God-made-man was walking the earth. In the backwater of Nazareth, people were rubbing shoulders with a Man who was God himself. They spoke with him, ate with him and enjoyed things with him. They were his friends and relatives. The time came when he left the village and launched into his public work as a prophet of God, gradually revealing that he was much more than a prophet, and indeed much more than just a man – though being man and prophet nevertheless. The greatest thing on earth was to be his disciple and friend and to share his life, and there were those who understood

this well. They left everything to follow him. But consider this. Jesus was a little difficult of access. Crowds impeded access to him. Moreover, he had continually to move on, for that was his mission. On one occasion when he had left the house in Capernaum very early to go out beyond the town to pray, Simon Peter sought him out, saying that all were looking for him. But he said he had to move on. On another occasion our Lord and the crowds were moving through Jericho, and Bar Timaeus the blind beggar began shouting for Jesus. The problem was the crowds. Fortunately our Lord heard him, and asked that he be brought to him. It was difficult remaining close – physically close – to our Lord, except for those he chose for this vocation, such as the Twelve. All this is to say that God the Son became man and subjected himself to the human condition. This involved limitations of space and time, which in turn shaped the circumstances in which a person could be his disciple and his friend. The possessed man in the territory of the Gerasenes (Mark 5), having been healed by our Lord, earnestly desired to accompany him. But our Lord would not let him. He received a different mission –

to spread the word about Jesus to his own pagan environs. He was a disciple, but was separated from Jesus because of his distinct vocation and the circumstances of time and place.

Ah! All that has now changed, because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and lives in glory. There is nothing separating us from him, neither time nor space nor any circumstances whatever. The one who is baptized is in Jesus Christ, just as he is in the Father. The baptized person, the member of Christ's Church founded on the apostles and on Peter, finds himself always to be close to Jesus – unless he deliberately breaks this wondrous bond by serious sin. Even if he sins, by the grace of God he can repent and be restored to closeness to Jesus Christ. Crowds cannot separate us from him, nor can distance, nor can our distinctive vocation which might take us anywhere and into unfavourable circumstances. We are in Jesus Christ, and nothing now can separate us from him. We are in union with Jesus, by faith, baptism and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is surely because of this that Christ said to his disciples at the Last Supper that *they ought be glad that he*

was going to the Father. He would be closer to them than ever before, because the Spirit would be sent to them. This is the import of our beautiful Gospel passage today (John 15: 1-8), in which our Lord tells his disciples, and through them to all of us, to remain in him. *"Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."* I am sure that our Lord longed to be able to be intimately close to each and all of his disciples, not only then, but from then on till the end of the world. In his human condition prior to his glorification he was subject to the limitations of time and space and many other limitations besides. Once glorified, there would be no such limitations. He would be the Vine that has branches, and each disciple till the end of the world would be like a branch growing on the Vine, pulsating with its life. Because of this union, every one of us can bear fruit that will last, whatever be our circumstances.

How blest is the Christian! How blest is the member of the Church which Christ founded on the Apostles! He does not simply live in the glow of the wonderful memory of Jesus Christ. He does not simply have the inestimable advantage of Christ's teaching. He is graced with a *union* with the living Person of Jesus. This is not only because of having received the grace to love Jesus Christ, but also because of the grace of rebirth in baptism that establishes his very being in the Person of Jesus. Jesus lives in him, as do the Father and the divine Spirit. The Christian shares in the divine life of Jesus, and wherever he is, whatever he does, whatever be his circumstances, he is in Jesus just as Jesus is in the Father. Let us live what we are, then!

A Second Reflection: (John 15:1-8)

Futility One of the most persistent human problems that many have to face is the sense of futility in one's life. Observing the apparent success of others, one can be struck by the feeling that, by comparison, one's life and work is of little value. It has borne little apparent fruit. It is a little hopeless. Now, has God said anything about this? God has

made it clear just what it is, in his sight, that will constitute a fruitful life and just who it is who will bear much fruit. In God's plan we are branches of a Vine, and he is the Vinedresser (John 15:1-8). The Vine is Christ. Therefore, enduring fruit has its source not primarily in our own gifts and efforts but in him. We will bear fruit, fruit that will last to the extent that we remain in union with him, as branches of the Vine. Our connection with him has its source, of course, in our baptism and this connection or union is nourished by our life of prayer and the sacraments.

We can all be fruitful and God wants all of us to bear fruit, much fruit, fruit that will last. This will happen if our union with Christ grows strong and if our efforts remain united to his. That is the answer to the sense of futility. Let us always bear this in mind, not only to overcome discouragement, but to ensure that we take the correct steps to make our lives truly fruitful.



Thursday of the Fifth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ex 15: 1-2 Let us sing to the Lord, for he has gloriously triumphed. The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation, alleluia.

Collect O God, by whose grace, though sinners, we are made just and, though pitiable, made blessed, stand, we pray, by your works, stand by your gifts, that those justified by faith may not lack the courage of perseverance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 15:7-21; Psalm 96:1-2a, 2b 3, 10;

John 15:9-11

Jesus said to his disciples: As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and

remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:9-11)

Joy It is almost proverbial that the problem for mankind is the problem of evil and suffering. I remember reading an article by a well-known British anthropologist who was a specialist in primal religions – the religions of indigenous societies. In his view, a key to the understanding of a primal religion was its response to evil and suffering. What do its myths and its ritual make of the evil in the world and the suffering that marks the course of man? The fact is that man is subject to so many forces that are absolutely beyond his control, and his helplessness in the face of this can be seen as one of the founts of religion. He appeals to the powers above him for help and salvation. He cannot get enough food. He is cold and threatened with fire and flood. Disease strikes his tribe or his people. He is being attacked by ruthless invaders. His infant children die from sickness. Why is life like this, and where is help to be found? He may even dimly understand that there is a more profound evil, and that is his

own propensity, and the propensity of other human beings, towards moral evil. He may grasp that his worst affliction is the corrupt tendency of his own heart and mind towards sin, and that this is the root of so much other evil that afflicts him and his kind. In a word, the facts of his case are grim and it is difficult to find happiness in this life. Now, of course, everyone seeks happiness and many seek and find it wherever they can, within the constraints of life as it is. They might gain a certain happiness by fairly innocent pleasures, by genuine satisfactions derived from worthwhile work and perhaps a fairly successful marriage. Some may seek their happiness by exploiting others or by various other forms of self-indulgence, and in general by what is really a life of sin. The problem facing everyone in life is, how so to live as to be happy? One cannot help but wonder how many persons ever gain the key to happiness. As we can see in the case of so many in history, the mere possession of power cannot give it. Wealth alone will not do, nor will sensual pleasure.

Granted the human condition as it is, is it then possible to be truly happy when much of life is a struggle, when it entails deprivation of what we would like, when our attainments seem so limited? What is the path to human happiness, a path that is open to all? For this we must turn and listen to the Teacher of all mankind, Jesus Christ. He tells us that if we remain in him we shall have a share in his joy. The foundation of the joy of Jesus Christ was his union with his heavenly Father. He lived in the love and in the sight of his heavenly Father, and did so from his childhood. We remember the event narrated in the Gospel of St Luke, in which Jesus as a youth of twelve remained behind in Jerusalem after going up for the Feast with his parents. After three days of heart-rending anxiety his parents found him in the Temple with the doctors, and he said to them, "*Did you not know I must be about my Father's affairs?*" His heavenly Father filled his human heart and soul, and his life was given over to the loving fulfilment of his will. *I always do what pleases him*, he said later in his public ministry. *My Father works, and so do I*, he explained in reference to his healing on the Sabbath. *The Father and I are one*, he said on another occasion. *No*

one comes to the Father except through me, he said again. The happiness of Jesus Christ came directly from his union with his heavenly Father, and it was a share in this happiness that he promised to his disciples. God wants all his children to be happy, and he has revealed to us in Jesus Christ how deep human happiness is to be attained, a happiness that is founded on what is ultimate and real. If our happiness is to be authentic and sure, if it is to be our possession in the midst of the evils and sufferings that will afflict us, then it must be a share in the happiness of Jesus Christ. The question of human history is, how is happiness to be attained, granted all the evil and suffering? The answer is to go to Jesus Christ and be his friend and disciple. That is to say, if we remain in his love by obeying his commands, we shall share in his joy.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be

complete" (John 15:9-11). There we have explained to us by God the Son made man what is the key to the happiness of man despite his difficult situation. The difficulties will not be taken away, necessarily, but happiness is promised. We must remain in the love of Jesus Christ by obeying his commands. That is the path to sharing in the joy of Christ, which is the true joy of man.

A Second Reflection: (Acts 15:7-21)

The Holy Spirit On one occasion in the Acts of the Apostles the disciples met some disciples of John, years after John's death. They asked John's disciples, have you received the Holy Spirit? John's disciples said they did not know anything about a Holy Spirit. This incident (and many like it could be mentioned), shows that on becoming a believer in Jesus and a member of his Church by baptism, one receives a very great and defining gift. This gift is the Person of the Holy Spirit who comes and makes his abode within. In Acts 15:7-21 we are told of Peter's description of the conversion of pagans. He said to the disciples – the infant Church – that "*In fact God, who can read*

everyone's heart, showed his approval of them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he had to us."

We who are baptised have received the Holy Spirit. But do we acknowledge or recognise Him? Do we allow Him to shape our lives as the great Friend and Guide we have been given by the Father and the Son? We must learn to listen to him daily. We must learn to cultivate the capacity to be guided by Him. This is itself a great grace to be prayed for.



Friday of the Fifth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5: 12 Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and divinity, and wisdom and strength and honour, alleluia.

Collect Grant us, Lord, we pray, that, being rightly conformed to the paschal mysteries, what we celebrate in joy may protect and save us with perpetual power. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 15:22-31; Psalm 8:9, 10 and 12;
 John 15:12-17

Jesus said to his disciples, My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I

learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other. (John 15:12-17)

His Friends Search the Scriptures and ask this: Is there any person in the Old Testament who is addressed by heaven in the way the Virgin Mary was addressed at the Annunciation? "*Hail, you who are full of grace,*" the Angel Gabriel said. "*The Lord is with you!*" Then he continued, "*You have found favour in the sight of God.*" Notice a second point, that in the presence of such fulsome praise Mary describes herself as being simply God's servant: "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word*" (Luke 1: 26-38). The prophets too are described in the Old Testament as God's servants. This, of course, is not the only image used of the children of Israel. God speaks of Israel as his spouse, and he is Israel's Husband. Israel is also his son. *I have called my son out of Egypt*, he said. God does not treat nor regard his chosen people simply as a lord

or king would an abject vassal, but as a God of tender love, a father. Commonly, though, individuals are considered "the servants" of Yahweh, servants who are called to love the Lord their God with all their heart and strength, and to obey his commands. The words of the Virgin Mary describing herself as the servant of the Lord and expressing her total obedience to his plan, may be said to be the quintessence of Old Testament spirituality. It is the essence of all revealed religion. Religion, as Cardinal Newman once wrote, is a matter of God's authority and our obedience to him. However condescending God is towards him, man is nothing apart from him and his gracious mercy. This is captured and expressed with soaring eloquence in the prayer of the Virgin Mary before her kinswoman Elizabeth, in which she glorifies the Lord for his mercy shown to his lowly handmaid. God is great, we are his lowly servants, and he is loving, compassionate and merciful in all his ways. With the coming of Christ, what we might call the servanthood of each of God's elect becomes suffused with the vocation to be God's friend. Mary, the

handmaid of the Lord, is now his mother. We who are his servants, are now also his friends.

Christ, who is Lord and Master of his disciples – they acknowledge this, and he accepts it – calls himself their friend, and them his friends. What more could he do for them as their friend than lay down his life for them? He has a *command* for them, and inasmuch as he is commanding them, they may be said to be his servants. His *command* is that they love one another as he has loved them. If they obey his command, they will be his friends. Thus obedience transforms their being his servants into their being his friends. Being true servants of Jesus Christ is the path to personal friendship with him, and this friendship with Jesus Christ is the essence of the Christian religion. Furthermore, the one who is in Christ ought see Christ's teaching as itself a gift of divine friendship, and it is the means whereby we can grow in a profound friendship with him. Precisely because he looks on us, his servants, as his friends, he has made us the gift of his revelation. By receiving his teaching in faith and living according to it

in obedience, we who are his servants grow in his friendship. *"Jesus said to his disciples, My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."* Each of us who are baptized into Christ and who accept his teaching in faith are the object of his personal choice. He has chosen us to be his friends who will go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last. Our life's work will depend on our friendship with Jesus Christ. *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other"* (John 15:12-17).

If we wish to be a friend of Jesus Christ, let us be his true servants who look on him as Lord and Master. He commands us and he teaches us. Above all, he commands us to love one another as he has

loved us. Behold the servant of the Lord, we ought say to him. Be it done to me according to your word. If we fulfil his commands in life we shall be drawn deeply into his friendship, and friendship with Jesus Christ is friendship with God. Thus it is that our vocation is to be *friends of God*. This is the purpose of the inspired story of the Covenants, which is what the Scriptures are all about. Glorious calling! *Friends of God* now, and friends of God forever hereafter! It all depends on our *obedience*, which is what distinguished the Virgin Mary and her most glorious Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

A Second Reflection: (Acts 15:22-31 and John 15:12-17)

Dedication There are various moments in our lives when we are prompted to ask ourselves where we are heading, what we are working for in life, and what we shall have achieved when life is over. These are questions that raise the thought of what are we dedicated to. Consider the passage in the Acts of the Apostles, 15:22-31. The apostles and elders, in their letter which they gave to Barsabbas and Silas, referred to Paul and Barnabas as men who had "*dedicated their lives to the name of*

our Lord Jesus Christ". They were dedicated to Jesus Christ. All of us are called by God to do the same, to be *dedicated to Jesus Christ*, in the different ways that correspond to our various callings and circumstances. Let us ask ourselves if we are in fact doing this. Any friendship – let us say, a marriage – requires dedication. Our Lord in John 15:12-17 tells us that he has chosen us to be his friends. He has dedicated himself to us and to friendship with us. We are called to do the same in return, and our eternity and that of others depends on our being truly *dedicated* to Jesus.

Let us then be dedicated to the most worthy and crucial of life's objects, friendship with Jesus.



Saturday of the Fifth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Col 2: 12 You have been buried with Christ in Baptism, through which you also rose again by faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead, alleluia.

Collect Almighty and eternal God, who through the regenerating power of Baptism have been pleased to confer on us heavenly life, grant, we pray, that those you render capable of immortality by justifying them may by your guidance attain the fullness of glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 16:1-10; Psalm 100:1b 2, 3, 5; John 15:18-21

Jesus said to his disciples, If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted

me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. (John 15:18-21)

Suffering Years ago an Australian politician remarked that "life was not meant to be easy." Strangely, that observation drew down upon him the ridicule of sections of the press, as if what he said was itself strange. He was simply saying that life inevitably brings many difficulties, and that these difficulties constitute a challenge to achieve what is worthwhile. One of the difficulties of life is the opposition and criticism of others, and most people receive at least a certain share of this. This opposition and criticism may be justified, or it may be unjustified. Usually it is a mixture of both because however well-meaning and enlightened we may be, we are faulty and limited human beings. Those faults and limitations evoke our neighbour's criticism and opposition, and those criticisms can cause suffering. There is often a dose of injustice in that opposition too, because while we may be faulty, our neighbour is also faulty. His faults

and sins often drive his criticisms of our efforts and of our persons. In fact, sin can be and often is the major cause of the suffering inflicted on others. All this is to say that a large portion of the suffering that is man's lot arises because of sin – the sin within the suffering person and the sin within the one inflicting the suffering. A common human problem is bitterness, and I am convinced that the appreciation of our common fallen condition can help us forgive others. Those who hurt us are also subject to a sinful condition, as are we. But now, while life was not meant to be easy, it is to be noticed that often in history life is particularly difficult for the one who is eminent in goodness. His own personal faults and sins often cannot be regarded as the principal reason for the suffering that is inflicted on him by others. The paradigmatic instance of this is Jesus Christ, the sinless One. He was without sin, without fault because he was divine. Yet he was hated by those who mattered, and ignored and spurned by many others. He ended his short life – all according to the divine plan, of course – utterly rejected and nailed to a cross. It set a mysterious pattern, that those who follow him

seriously, and in general the Church he founded, would share in his sufferings.

As has been said, those who follow Jesus Christ are faulty and limited human beings, and their faults, sins and limitations will attract the opposition and criticism of others. Just as Jesus Christ suffered, so will they. But in their case personal sin will have a part to play in bringing down this suffering, in a way that was not at all the case of Jesus Christ. However, that is not the whole story, for Christ's sufferings do set a special pattern that must be expected to recur in the history of the Church. The Church will be made to suffer in a special sense, and in ways well beyond what is warranted. Saints will suffer greatly, and it will often be due to the sinfulness and faults of those who inflict the suffering, just as was the case with Jesus Christ. Let us listen to what our Lord has to say on this. *"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates*

you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me" (John 15:18-21). Just as the sinless Christ was accused and condemned for wrongdoing, eminent and holy members of his Church will be accused and condemned for wrongdoing. There will often be just enough of fault and limitation in these great disciples of Jesus Christ to convince their accusers that they are doing a good deed in condemning them, and to cloud their perception of the enormity of their unjust actions. They will think they are doing a meritorious deed, whereas they are perpetrating calumnies and harm to society and the Church. But the disciple of Jesus Christ suffers as Christ suffered, and his sufferings sanctify him and bring sanctification to the Church and to the world. Thus are the sufferings of Jesus Christ continued, and the work of redemption advances.

When, for instance, an outstanding and holy Pope is attacked repeatedly by the secular media, and confusion and misinformation is spread as a result, the suffering he endures unites him to the crucified Christ. Just as Christ's sufferings redeemed the world and brought the gift of sanctity to those who accept him, so the sufferings of his close disciple increases the reservoirs of grace. Christ suffers in him, and in the process sanctifies him and the Church. Let us not be dismayed at immense opposition, criticism and sufferings being at times heaped upon the Church and upon the Church's chosen representatives. They walk in the footsteps of the Lord. It must be expected.

A Second Reflection (Acts 16:1-10; John 15: 18-21)

Listening to the Holy Spirit At times in life we wonder why God allowed certain circumstances to have occurred in our life – circumstances that prevented us from doing the good we felt we should have been permitted to do. Perhaps those with authority over us prevented us from doing obvious good. As we look back on so many frustrations, we might ask, Why did not God allow us to achieve more

good? But consider how our Lord himself was “frustrated” in the course of his ministry. His heavenly Father permitted all kinds of opposition to stand in his way, right to Calvary. This seeming frustration was according to the plan of God. Or again, the Gospel describes how our Lord invited certain people to follow him – physically. He allowed others to follow him uninvited, such as Bar Timaeus, the blind man whom he cured. But consider the man in the land of the Gerasenes whom he cured of devil-possession. The cured demoniac pleaded with our Lord to allow him to follow him, but our Lord would not permit him. He told him he was to return to his people and tell them all that God had done for him – which he dutifully did. We notice in the Acts of the Apostles 16:1-10, that when Paul and his companions travelled through Phrygia and Galatia they were *“told by the Holy Spirit not to preach the word in Asia.”* Why did the Holy Spirit forbid them to do this very good thing? We are not told. Again, in the next sentence, *“When they reached the frontier of Mysia they thought to cross it into Bithynia, but as the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them, they went through Mysia and came down to Troas.”* God

may not want us to do what we think would be the better thing. But he does plan that we do good, and in the same passage in Acts, Paul has the vision of the Macedonian appealing to him to come. So as Luke says, "*we lost no time in arranging a passage to Macedonia, convinced that God had called us to bring them the Good News.*"

Let us do the good which God in his providence means us to do, not the good we would like to do, even though it may seem to be much the better. The key is to learn to do what Paul and his companions did. They listened to the Holy Spirit.



Sixth Sunday of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 48: 20 Proclaim a joyful sound and let it be heard; proclaim to the ends of the earth: The Lord has freed his people, alleluia.

Collect Grant, almighty God, that we may celebrate with heartfelt devotion these days of joy, which we keep in honour of the risen Lord, and that what we relive in remembrance we may always hold to in what we do. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 15:1-2.22-29; Psalm 66;
 Apocalypse 21:10-14.22-23; John 14:23-29

Jesus said, If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy

Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. (John 14: 23-29)

The Spirit

In classical times, Judaic monotheism was remarkable. While there was something of monotheism in the Platonic concept of God (as interpreted and used by, let us say, Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite), as well as in the Advaita, Dvaita and Vishishtadvaita philosophies of Hinduism, nevertheless the religion stemming directly from Abraham was singular and unusual in rigorously insisting on one, sole, supreme and very active God. Some scholars have argued that the monotheism of Abraham and the patriarchs did not originally exclude the gods of other peoples. It

insisted that Yahweh alone was to be worshipped by the children of Israel, and that he was supreme over the gods of other peoples. Such scholars opine that there was a development of *revelation* on this point, in that it was only gradually *revealed* that there was but one God and that the gods of the peoples were actually non-existent. I would counter this theory by saying that the original revelation granted to Abraham was indeed strictly monotheistic – that there is in reality but one God – but the Judaic *understanding* of the implications of this developed over time. That is to say that while in other matters (such as the nature of the Messiah, monogamy, etc.) more and more was revealed by God through the prophets, the original revelation granted to Abraham and the patriarchs was firmly monotheistic. But it was only gradually appreciated over the course of the Judaic tradition that this excluded even the very existence of other gods, let alone their worship – and in this sense there was a development of *doctrine*. Whatever about that academic dispute, the monotheism of the people of Israel was a watershed in the history of religion because polytheism was the typical belief of mankind. Israel's prophets were profoundly insistent on this

doctrine, and its monotheism was destined to have a remarkable influence on religious history. Now, while the one only God revealed himself to Abraham, to the patriarchs, to Moses and the prophets, a new revelation of this same monotheism occurred with the coming of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ revealed that he, man though he is, is the natural Son of the heavenly Father. He is the same one divine Being as is the Father, but he is distinct from the Father as a Person. This was a public testimony, given before the people and before the leaders of the nation. It was supported by the holiness of his life and the miraculous things he did. He freely gave himself up to suffering and death in witness to this astounding revelation. But there was more. It is clear from the Gospels that our Lord also publicly referred to the Holy Spirit as a divine Person. For instance, in dispute with the leaders of the people who accused him of being in league with Satan, Christ told them that to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit would be an unforgivable sin. However, it appears from the Gospel of St John that it was

especially to the Apostles that Christ spoke of the Person of the Holy Spirit. St John's Gospel suggests that it was at the Last Supper that Christ spoke most fulsomely of the divine Spirit. Jesus himself is to be loved and obeyed, and the one who does obey him will be visited by the Father and by him, and the two will make their home with him. He, then, acts as the Father acts, and he acts in concert with the Father. But there is also the third divine Person who acts with him and with the Father. The Father will send the Holy Spirit in the name of the Son, and he will assist the disciples to live according to his word. *"All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you"* (John 14: 23-29). The Holy Spirit will be the great Counsellor, and he will teach us everything. He will preserve in our memory the words of Jesus. St John seems to suggest that due to the Spirit there will be a development in the Church's understanding of what Christ has revealed and taught. That is, there will not be further developments of revelation, but there will be developments in *doctrine*, which is to say in the Church's

understanding of what has been revealed. The revelation has been given once and for all, but the Holy Spirit will teach us "all things" that have not yet been grasped, and will remind us of what we would otherwise forget.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit was manifested, given and communicated as a divine Person to the infant Church gathered as a body. On that day the Holy Trinity was fully revealed not just to the Apostles, but to the Church as such. Those who believe in Jesus Christ share in the life of the Holy Trinity by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. The mission of Christ and the mission of the Holy Spirit then became the mission of the Church, which is sent to the world to proclaim and spread the mystery of the communion of the Holy Trinity. Let us abide in the life and love of the Holy Trinity, then, for this is our calling now and hereafter.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.731-732
(Holy Spirit and The Last Times)

A Second Reflection: (John 14:23-29)

"If anyone loves me he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home with him."

True Peace The heart of the practice of the Christian Faith is love for Jesus Christ. We were made to know and love Jesus Christ. From before the world was made, God chose each of us to be a faithful friend of Jesus, and the test of this is the desire to keep his word. As our Lord said to his disciples, *'If anyone loves me he will keep my word.'* He repeats the point: *'those who do not love me do not keep my words'* (John 14:23-29). Again, elsewhere our Lord says: *'If anyone loves me he will keep my commandments, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in His love.'* The test of our love for Jesus lies in what we are actually doing. Granted this test, we ought always bear in mind the essential goal of life, which is to have a great love for

Jesus. One result of loving Jesus – as we read in today's Gospel – is that Jesus will come to us and will remain continually with us. There is more. Our Lord says that the one who loves him will be loved by the Father. Further, by the action of the Holy Spirit both Jesus and the Father will come to him and make their home with him. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ becomes present in the Holy Eucharist at Mass. By the same power of the Holy Spirit, the one who loves Jesus will be loved by the Father and all three will come and dwell with him.

As a result of this, we are granted a share in the peace that fills the soul of Jesus. The indwelling of the Blessed Trinity protects us from losing true peace of heart. Thus it is that our Lord says in today's Gospel, *"Peace I bequeath to you, my peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you."* We should take our Lord's words seriously, and if we are not experiencing peace in our lives, we ought ask ourselves why this is so. It may be because our lives are not

based on the decision to love Jesus and to keep his word, and then to cultivate and treasure the thought of the indwelling of the most Holy Trinity. If we are loving and serving Jesus, then we must make the decision not to let things trouble us or make us fearful. How do we do this? We do it by taking to heart the fact that God dwells within. We must believe this on the word of Jesus Christ. God the Holy Trinity is near, intimately near, and nothing, neither life nor death, no powers earthly or otherwise, nothing, can separate us from Him who so loves us. We have no need to fear – in an ultimate and absolute sense - even though we shall have our moments, as did our Lord himself in the Garden of Gethsemane. The peace that is the gift of God is present in the midst of sorrow. God whom we love and serve, God who dwells within, will look after us. Right to the end we must trust – right to the very end – ever obeying Him, no matter what the cost or the consequences.

As we think of our Lord's words in today's Gospel, let us think of the call to each one of us to personal holiness. Everyone is called by

God to seek personal holiness which means a great personal love for Jesus. We show that love by keeping his word in our everyday life no matter what the cost. If that is our aim, we may resolve not to let our hearts be troubled or afraid.

Monday of the Sixth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rom 6: 9 Christ, having risen from the dead, dies now no more; death will no longer have dominion over him, alleluia.

Collect Grant, O merciful God, that we may experience at all times the fruit produced by the paschal observances. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 16:11-15; Psalm 149:1b 6a and 9b;
John 15:26-16:4a

Jesus said to his disciples, When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the

Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. (John 15:26-16:4a)

The Divine Spirit The account of the Last Supper occupies nearly a fifth of the Gospel of St John. It is longer than John's account of the Passion, and even a little longer than his accounts of the Passion and Resurrection combined. It is the longest continual episode in that Gospel. It is slightly longer than Luke's combined accounts of the Last Supper, the Passion and the Resurrection, and is also notably longer than the great Sermon on the Mount of St Matthew's Gospel. We could say that the Last Supper according to St John is the longest unit of all four Gospels, which indicates how altogether special an event it was in itself, and certainly in the mind of the inspired author. For John, the

Last Supper was absolutely unforgettable, and the source of a lifetime of inspiration, memory and teaching. It contains the summit of our Lord's teaching, especially when combined with John's chapter 6 which is devoted to our Lord's doctrine on the Eucharist. John does not include in his Last Supper narrative the institution of the Eucharist because, obviously, this was already clear from the other Gospels, and clear too from the infant Church's liturgy. In fact, the discourses of our Lord and his great prayer during the Last Supper are brimful of revealed teaching, including, not least, his explicit teaching on the Person of the Holy Spirit. We must presume that it was especially during the Last Supper – though not only during it – that our Lord informed his disciples about the divine Spirit. Just as it took time for the Apostles to understand that the Man before them was divine, the Son of the Father and equal to him in nature, so too it would have taken time for them to realize our Lord's teaching on the Holy Spirit. John reports our Lord's words that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things, and remind them of what he had told them. We may presume that this was exactly John's experience. Due to the action of the Holy Spirit, he came to

understand the meaning of our Lord's words about the Spirit of God, and was enabled to remember them – and for our benefit.

Our Lord's great discourses of the Supper occupy three chapters – 14, 15, 16 – prior to his prayer to the Father which constitutes chapter 17. In each of those three chapters there are teachings on the Person of the Holy Spirit. This means (considering the original text as prior to its subsequent division into chapters) that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit pervades our Lord's teaching during the Last Supper. That is to say, he was referring to the Holy Spirit throughout his teaching during the Supper. In chapter 14 there are two references (verses 16 and 26) to the Holy Spirit as the Advocate, Comforter or Counsellor (*paraklēton*) and as the Spirit of truth. He will teach the disciples and remind them of Christ's teaching. Another reference (15: 26) which is in our Gospel passage today, is again to the Holy Spirit as the Advocate or Comforter (*paraklētos*) and the Spirit of truth (*pneuma tēs alētheias*). The third chapter of these discourses (ch.16) contains two separate references to the Holy Spirit. The first of them (16:7-11) is again to the Holy Spirit

as the Advocate or Comforter (*parakltēos*), and the second (16:13-14) is to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth (*pneuma tēs alētheias*). What is manifest in these titles is that the Holy Spirit is a divine Person who is about to be sent with a mission, just as Christ himself was sent with a mission. There is a difference in the origin of the Holy Spirit's mission. While Christ was sent by the Father, in our passage today (15:26) Christ will send the Holy Spirit from the Father. In the following chapter (16:7) Christ says he will send the Holy Spirit. So the Holy Spirit will come from the Father because he proceeds (*ekporeuetai*) from the Father, but in some way at the initiative of Christ. In chapter fourteen (verses 16 and 26), the role of Christ in the sending of the Spirit is expressed in two ways. The Father will give the Holy Spirit to them at the request of Christ (vs 16), while a little later (vs 26) the Father sends the Holy Spirit in the name of Christ. So while the Father takes the initiative in sending the Son, the Son has a special role in the sending of the Holy Spirit who, though, proceeds from the Father. In her teaching and her creeds, the Church has clarified that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son as their mutual

love. He is, as it were, the Sigh or Embrace of love between the two. The point here, though, is that the Holy Spirit is the gift of Christ to his disciples, while coming from the Father. He will testify to the disciples about Jesus Christ.

Let us think a great deal of the third divine Person. So much depends on his action! He will testify to each of us and to the whole Church about the One we are called to follow with all our hearts. Christ peremptorily invites us to follow him every day, taking up our cross and following in his footsteps. He has sent us the gift of the Holy Spirit to testify to him throughout our lives. There are so many moments of difficulty and temptation. The Holy Spirit is our God-given Guide and Friend in our efforts to follow Jesus Christ. Let us learn to love him, then!



Tuesday of the Sixth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 19: 7, 6 Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to God, for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns, alleluia.

Collect Grant, almighty and merciful God, that we may in truth receive a share in the Resurrection of Christ your Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 16:22-34; Psalm 138:1-3, 7c-8; John 16:5-11

Jesus said, Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and

in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. (John 16:5-11)

The Spirit of Jesus It is characteristic of the Christian to long to be with Christ and to gaze upon his face. The faithful Christian experiences moments of – what we might almost call – envy, at the Apostles' and disciples' good fortune at having lived at the very time of Jesus Christ, and at having known him personally. They lived familiarly with him day by day and gazed into his eyes, looked upon his face, heard his voice and his gentle laughter. They observed the nobility of Christ's mind and way – he was God himself become man. His manhood was perfectly pleasing to his heavenly Father. *"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased,"* the Father had said from heaven. His disciples came to see that the purpose of life was to know Jesus Christ and to live in his friendship, which meant living according to his commands. As our Lord said at the Last Supper, eternal life is this, to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. We read that our Lord selected from his disciples the

Twelve, who would be with him as his companions and who would be sent out on his behalf. This is the purpose of life and the point of the Christian religion. It is to live as Christ's companion and to take part in his mission in the way suited to one's particular vocation. What a blessing to have known personally Jesus Christ! We read of our Lord being received at the home of Martha and Mary, and of Mary seated at the Lord's feet as he spoke, while Martha prepared the meal and did the serving. But of course, there were immense limitations inherent in this situation because of the very Incarnation. In becoming man and entering into our human condition, there was a limit to the extent that Christ could be known and loved personally. If salvation consists in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, how could a Gaul, a Briton, an Egyptian, a Parthian, a Roman, a Spaniard or a Mesopotamian arrive at a personal friendship with Jesus who lived in Galilee? How were the nations of the whole world ever to become friends of the Redeemer?

This is just one reason why our Lord says to the Apostles in today's Gospel, *"I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going*

away.” His return to the Father – which is to say, his glorification and his transcending of normal human limitations – would mean a great leap ahead in his mission to unite all mankind to himself. In the plan of God, all mankind is called to friendship with Jesus, and this calling is entrusted to the Church to effect by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who makes this possible, and the instrument of this is the Church, Christ's mystical body. So it was for our good that Christ went away. As a result of his departure, the Spirit was sent and Christ was thenceforth able to work with power. In a sense, Christ's public ministry was a failure – he ended up being crucified. But this was the direct and immediate path to his glorification, and that made possible the imparting of his Spirit to the Church. Thenceforth, endowed with the Spirit of Christ, the Church spread while bearing the cross of Christ all the while. While still with his disciples, our Lord met continually with incomprehension and uncertainty. They could not understand his insistence that he had to suffer. There were many other things they could not understand, and their following of him was problematic. He was betrayed by one of his own, and when he was arrested in the

Garden of Gethsemane, they all fled. The coming of the Holy Spirit changed so much of this in that their adherence to him became bold, firm and lifelong. Their words in witness to him had power and converted many. There was a powerful impetus to bear witness in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth – which is what Christ commanded. But it would have been out of the question, were it not for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Mysteriously, for this to happen it was necessary that our Lord go. *"Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."*

In the accounts of the resurrection and the commissioning of the disciples by the risen Jesus, the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins is emphasised. They are to go to the whole world and preach repentance and the forgiveness of sin. This is because the sin of the world has now been taken away – in principle. But this grand benefit has to be brought to each individual, and each must be brought to repent. For this the Holy Spirit would be necessary. *"When he comes,"* our Lord promised, *"he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin*

and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:5-11). Let us love the Holy Spirit and depend on him, for he will unite us to Christ and help us to bring the Saviour to the world, and a repentant world to the Saviour.

A Second Reflection: (Acts 16:22-34)

The Power of God One of our most persistent problems in living the Christian life is that we do not think God is very powerful (nor very loving). How confident in God are we, when we turn to ask Him for what we need? We tend to think that God can do many things, but that there are limits to his power because the laws of the universe have their power too. These laws circumscribe, we tend to think, the power of the supreme Lawgiver, and in effect limit his power. The forces at work in the universe have their independent sphere of influence. That is to say, we tend to be polytheists without knowing it. We are not unlike believers in other "gods," even though we profess our faith in the one almighty God, infinite in power as in everything else. Sacred Scripture constantly presents us with the power of God, a power that is so great – without limit – and that shows itself in mercy. Especially notable is the

power of God to change hearts. Consider the gaoler guarding Paul in the first reading of today (Acts 16: 22-34). He was about to kill himself at the miraculous escape of the prisoners but at the word and appeal of Paul he underwent a remarkable spiritual transformation. In a moment he arrived at faith in Christ, tending the wounds of the Apostles, prompting the conversion of his own family and becoming a member the Church. It was a transformation wrought by the power of God and his grace, which showed itself in saving mercy.

The power of God is revealed across the pages of Scripture. We are all called to share in the Church's mission to evangelise. By the power of God's grace our daily example and efforts will bear fruit. Let us then always trust in God's loving power, and not slip into the assumption that God's power is limited by the other powers at work in the universe.



Wednesday of the Sixth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17): 50; 22 (21): 23 I will praise you,
Lord, among the nations; I will tell of your name to my kin, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, O Lord, that, as we celebrate in mystery the solemnities of your Son's Resurrection, so, too, we may be worthy to rejoice at his coming with all the Saints. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 17:15, 22 18:1; Psalm 148:1-2, 11-14;
John 16:12-15

Jesus said to his disciples, I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to

you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (John 16:12 15)

The Holy Spirit will teach us The beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed a silent revolution in the development of a vast library of electronic books available to people in their home studies all over the world. While there were many large gaps, a great proportion of Western thought became accessible in on-line and downloadable e-books. Most major writers and a surprising number of obscure ones across the centuries were and are now accessible to a greater or lesser extent on the Internet. The subjects of study range from the popular to the scholarly, and more and more commercial publishers are discovering the advantages of on-line distribution. It is a remarkable advance in the possibilities of culture and education, and one cannot help but be fascinated at the flourishing of this phenomenon. It is theoretically possible for all publications to find their eventual place on the Internet, all of which is accessible to the home computer. Let us for a moment pause and think of the libraries of the world and all their

books, and of all that can be investigated and known. The range of options in education is now staggering, including at the highest levels. It would be hard to imagine a single field which does not have a strong, and at times vast, quota of PhDs to its credit. So in the face of all that is known and that is yet to be known, the question arises, what *ought* man strive to know? He instinctively desires and seeks knowledge, for he understands that knowledge is a gateway to success. But what is it to be ultimately successful, and what above all *ought* he endeavour to know? Many do not seriously ask this question, but simply set out to know what is necessary for a career or for the pursuit of some personal interests. A man wants to work in law, so he studies law. He has an interest in Italian, so he studies Italian. But of course, the *ultimate* importance of the good things in this world lies in their significance for the next. So the *things that pertain to the next* should be studied very seriously indeed, and this is something that most people seem not to do at all. This is tragic, because life is short and eternity long.

While it is very important and indeed a noble undertaking to study and know the things of this life, it is of supreme importance that each person study and come to know what is necessary for the next life. If he does not know what eternal life is, nor how to attain it, how is he to get there? "*Eternal life is this,*" our Lord said, "*to know you Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*" For all the books and fields of study in the world, there is one thing that everyone is called to consider, and then to know. It is the Person of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of man. Each of us has the gift of life in order to know, love, and serve God here on earth so as to see and enjoy him forever in heaven. This means knowing, loving and serving Jesus Christ. We, each of us, must make it our daily business to know Jesus Christ better and better, so as to love him more and more. To know and love Christ Jesus is the goal of life. *On the basis* of this personal knowledge of Jesus Christ which ought be growing daily, we then devote ourselves to the knowledge and service of the demanding requirements of this life. Conversely, the most important thing which the world must be taught is the good news of the Person of Jesus Christ. Thus it is that our

Lord stresses the paramount mission of bearing witness to him before the world. The one thing that humanity must come to know is the Person of Jesus Christ and his divine revelation. He tells his disciples that the Holy Spirit will come to them to testify about him, and that they in their turn must bear witness to him before others, no matter what the cost. The Holy Spirit will guide them to all truth. *"When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you."* The Holy Spirit is the one who will help us, and the world, to know the truth of Christ Jesus.

Early on Holy Saturday morning, April 3, 2010, Pietro Molla, husband of Saint Gianna Molla, died in his family home in Mesero, near Milan in Italy, surrounded by his children. Pietro Molla was 97 years old and had been in failing health for several years. All agree he was an exemplary Catholic, and some have even stated their belief that in due course his own Cause for Canonization will be

introduced. There is one thing that Pietro knew, as did his wife, Saint Gianna. *He knew the Person of Jesus Christ* and this was because of the grace of the Holy Spirit. So then, let us look to the Holy Spirit to help us to grow in our knowledge and love of Jesus.



Thursday of the Sixth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67): 8-9, 20 O God, when you went forth before your people, marching with them and living among them, the earth trembled, heavens poured down rain, alleluia.

Collect O God, who made your people partakers in your redemption, grant, we pray, that we may perpetually render thanks for the Resurrection of the Lord. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 18:1-8; Psalm 98:1-4; John 16:16-20

Jesus said to his disciples, In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me. Some of his disciples said to one another, What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'? They kept asking, What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying. Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, Are you asking

one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'? I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. (John 16:16-20)

Christ Unseen I remember attending a spiritual retreat on one occasion, and included in the program of the retreat were some discussions. One participant in the retreat stated that a real difficulty for her in living a life devoted to Jesus Christ was the fact that she could not see, hear and touch him. If I am to be a friend of him – which is the essence of the Christian religion – then I want to be able to see him, she said. Mary Magdalene at the tomb was granted the grace to see him and to hold him – our Lord said to her, "*Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father.*" The disciples were able to *see and hear and touch* our Lord. It was granted to St Paul to have *seen* the risen Jesus in a vision on the way to Damascus. As a result, he was very real to him. But I will never in this life see him, and that is very difficult for me. What is to be said of this lament? To begin with, it is the

characteristic difficulty of the modern age which tends to think that the only things that exist are things that are empirically verifiable. We are naturalists, which is to say that we moderns tend only to accept the reality of the natural world, and anything supernatural is assumed to be nothing more than a phantom. It is a metaphysical position that is fundamentally an assumption. It is probably due to the influence of the great scientific advances of the modern era, which have tended to make us unconscious adherents of scientism – a belief or assumption that the methods of natural science, or the categories and things recognized in natural science, form the only proper elements in any philosophical or other inquiry. The overall upshot is that, due to our cultural starting points, we have a special difficulty in appreciating the unseen world as being truly real. The notions driving our modern culture sweep us along in the quest for tangible benefits, while things spiritual and unseen are ignored, forgotten or positively dismissed as basically fanciful. As Marx said, unseen things such as God and heaven constitute an opiate for the masses.

There is no getting away from the fact that while Jesus Christ is real, he is unseen. Of course, religion in general is concerned with unseen things, even though those unseen things are usually represented in some way by material things – constituting the danger of idolizing those material things. But Jesus Christ is a real, living man who rose from the dead, and the Christian religion is all about having a true, vital and profound relationship with him precisely as living. He is not a past Teacher who lives in his teaching and who influences by the memory of his exemplary life. He is a present living Teacher, the Master and Lord who is brimming with life, and who is far nearer to each of us than was possible during his mortal life. But he is unseen. As we read in the Gospel of today: *"In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me. Some of his disciples said to one another, What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?"* (John 16: 16-20). What this means is that the Christian must take daily steps to fortify and support a life of faith in the word of Jesus Christ. If his faith in this word becomes weak, then

his dependence on the things of this world will grow and in proportion to this, the unseen will appear to be unreal. We must take active steps to help ourselves to *realize* what we believe. We must put a little time each day into reading the words of Christ and the inspired records of his Person and deeds. We must put time each day into formally placing ourselves in his presence and with the aid of those inspired records, communing with him. We must endeavour consciously to live in his presence, for in fact we are in his presence though we do not advert to it. We must actively do what we do for love of him and in the way that pleases him. We must, in sum, live as his friends, as friends of One who is nearer to us than is possible for any friend in the flesh. This will not be possible unless we live according to a plan of life entirely geared towards this.

Every morning, let us on rising immediately place ourselves in the presence of our unseen Friend, Jesus Christ risen from the dead, glorified and at the right hand of the Father. He is near, within. Placing ourselves in his presence, let us offer him everything in the day to

come, resolving to do all in a way that will please him – which is to say, in accord with his most holy will. Let us place ourselves in the care of Mary the mother of our Lord and Saviour, and in the care of our Guardian Angel, assigned by God to accompany us on our way to him. Let us do all we can to ensure that though Jesus Christ is unseen, our faith is such that he is every bit as real to us as if he were seen.

A Second Reflection (Acts of the Apostles 18:1-8)

“Pagans” In Our Midst Our Lord's final words to his disciples were that they were to make disciples of all the nations. We are his disciples, so what are we doing about it? As St Ignatius Loyola asks us in his *Spiritual Exercises*, *What have I done for Christ to this point? What am I doing for him? And what do I intend to do for him?* In the Acts of the Apostles 18:1-8 we see St Paul resolving to turn to the pagans in order to tell them the Good News about Christ. Have we ever had a comparable resolve, or anything like it – and there are plenty of "pagans" among us in our secular society. It is possible to go right through life never making the slightest attempt to

introduce others to Christ, let alone introduce him to those who are virtually pagans, who do not know him at all. Such people are found among all the professions. If the world is to come to know Christ, it will of necessity depend very largely on the lay Christian who is in the world with those who do not know Christ and what he has revealed. The challenge for the lay faithful is to find effective means of entering into a dialogue of salvation so as to be able to bear witness to what He has revealed. But this will not happen unless there is the desire to engage in this dialogue.

Let us pray for this desire, and then pray to the Holy Spirit for the light to know how to fulfill it.



Friday of the Sixth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5: 9-10 You have redeemed us, Lord, by your Blood from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us into a kingdom, priests for our God, alleluia.

Collect O God, who restore us to eternal life in the Resurrection of Christ, raise us up, we pray, to the author of our salvation, who is seated at your right hand, so that, when our Savior comes again in majesty, those you have given new birth in Baptism may be clothed with blessed immortality. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

In regions where the Ascension is celebrated on the following Sunday:

Hear our prayers, O Lord, so that what was promised by the sanctifying power of your Word may everywhere be accomplished through the working of the Gospel and that all your adopted children may attain what the testimony of truth has foretold. Through our Lord Jesus

Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 18:9-18; Psalm 47:2-7; John 16:20-23

Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no-one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. (John 16:20-23)

Joy Broadly, reality is manifestly *ordered*. It would be absurd to say that chaos reigns and that things depend simply on chance. There is a definite universe with its discoverable laws, and perhaps we could say that precisely because of these laws there are accidents, tragedies and

suffering. A person sets out in his car which functions according to plan but on the way is involved in a terrible collision which leaves him maimed for life. Ultimately this was not due to mere “chance” because the car into which he collided was acting on its own laws. What was lacking was knowledge, or attention or whatever else which resulted in the hapless occurrence. This does not eliminate the problem of suffering and evil being allowed by an almighty, all-wise and loving Creator, but the point made here is that the universe is broadly an ordered one. By reason alone we may not be able to perceive a long-range “design” or “end” *towards which* things are ordered, but it is obvious to reason that “order” in the sense of “structure” is everywhere. This fact requires an explanation – but this too is not the point here. The point to be noticed here is that an important feature of the fundamentally ordered character of reality is its drive for “happiness” – if we may use this word by way of analogy from human experience. *Happiness*: it is self-evident that everyone desires to be *happy*, the problem being what this means and how it is to be achieved. Aristotle has it that happiness is the highest good of the

person and is desired for its own sake. That person is happy who is flourishing. Living well and faring well is being happy (*Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1). As to what effects this, Aristotle teaches that it involves numerous requirements having been fulfilled to some degree – requirements such as food, shelter, a moral life, good work, education. Let us leave the matter of what constitutes happiness there, and simply observe that *all of creation* seeks to be “happy” in the sense that it possesses the drive to *flourish*. From the tiny atom to the towering tree, from the smallest sea creature to the bull-elephant, there is “order” or “structure” with the inbuilt impulse to flourish which may or may not be fulfilled. The universe as a whole shows a drive to “fare well” – and bespeaks a transcendent Orderer who is its Cause, and whose life is in full flourish.

Then there is the pinnacle of the universe – man. Man desires to be happy, and this desire is constant and unfailing. It is planted within him by his Creator, and it is a great boon to him that he desires to flourish at every important dimension of his life and being. How sad it

is if ever this desire is lost! Of course, it is critical that he find the *true* way to flourish. The problem is that while there is the desire, all too commonly the *fulfilment* of it is frustrated. Indeed, we can say this of the universe as a whole – frustration, pain or indeed catastrophe at the macro or micro level is common. It is like the tides of the sea, receding for a respite but ever returning, age after age. Evil and suffering are forever rising and falling, encroaching, engulfing and then receding, but never conquered and eliminated. So striking is this feature of the visible world that the best minds and hearts will allow that it constitutes a serious incentive to reject the proposition that there is a wise, good and all-powerful God who has caused and ordered the world. John Henry Newman, now beatified, wrote that “I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress.” He is referring to the sight of evil and suffering. “Were it not for this voice, speaking so clearly in my conscience and in my heart, I should be an atheist, or a pantheist, or a polytheist when I looked into the world.” Thus is the obvious order of the world so seriously compromised by the prevalence of evil. “The sight of the world is

nothing else than the prophet's scroll, full of 'lamentations, and mourning, and woe.'" (*Apologia*, p. 250, *World's Classics*). Peter Singer, the prominent Utilitarian philosopher of the beginning of the twenty-first century, rejected the existence of God because of the poor job the world appears to be. This is not to say that mankind is typically in gloom, because many seek their happiness by fulfilling those needs which this broken world can meet. This world can provide the gratification of many human needs and so there is laughter and fun to a point. Some of man's requirements are met, but not his greatest. His greatest is reconciliation and communion with his Maker, and more than anything happiness and flourishing hereafter. This is where Jesus Christ appears as so very essential for mankind, for it is he who offers mankind its deepest and lasting happiness.

For what did he say? *I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.* He promises that our grief, if we hold fast to him, will turn to joy. *Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will*

rejoice, and no-one will take away your joy (John 16:20-23). We are conscious of our desire and need for happiness. We see this same impulse reflected everywhere. We are also conscious of its frustration. But Jesus Christ, the Lord of lords and the Lord of history, promises final and lasting joy to us and to the universe. Most assuredly, he will conquer. So let us ever go to him. If we live in his presence, follow him to the end whatever be the cost, then life and flourishing in abundance will be ours.



Saturday of the Sixth Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. 1 Pt 2: 9 O chosen people, proclaim the mighty works of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light, alleluia.

Collect O God, whose Son, at his Ascension to the heavens, was pleased to promise the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, grant, we pray, that, just as they received manifold gifts of heavenly teaching, so on us, too, you may bestow spiritual gifts. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

In regions where the Solemnity of the Ascension is celebrated on the following Sunday:

Collect Constantly shape our minds, we pray, O Lord, by the practice of good works, that, trying always for what is better, we may strive to hold ever fast to the Paschal Mystery. Through our Lord Jesus Christ,

your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 18:23-28; Psalm 47:2-3, 8-10; John 16:23b-28

Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete. Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father. (John 16:23b 28)

Petition It is the common experience of man that there are numerous things causing him great suffering that seem to be beyond resolution. The problems can be objectively massive, or objectively

minor. For instance – what might seem to be a minor issue. There is only one photo of a beloved grandmother or aunt, and other copies have not been made. Inexplicably, it is lost. A search is begun, but it is unsuccessful. *The loss causes grief for years to come*, because the grandmother or aunt was so beloved, and now there is no exact likeness. The photo is somewhere, but nothing done is able to locate it. It could be a diary which a great-grandmother kept over the years. Where has it gone? Let us take other problems. A member of the family diagnosed with melanoma and he is soon engulfed in various cancer operations that finally involve brain tumours. It is a problem that seems beyond the power of anyone to resolve. Or again, there are serious droughts year after year in a large section of the country and no one is able to do anything about it. The result is that the lives of various farmers are gradually falling to pieces, and the town is reduced to a knife-edge existence. It is a problem that seems beyond the power of anyone to resolve. The examples could go on. Now, this situation – so common for man – is not entirely negative. It can have this positive feature that throughout history this experience of helplessness before

threats and needs has usually been a wellspring of religion. I remember years ago there was a movie which featured the early Christians being persecuted in pagan Rome. A Christian who was physically powerful was set in the arena, and a dangerous bull was released to attack him. It was sport for the crowd. A pagan in the amphitheatre who was in love with a Christian woman, as he watched the two facing one another, cried out in his heart: "Christ, if you exist, give the victory to the Christian!" He continued to repeat the prayer as the Christian and the bull met in mortal combat. The Christian eventually won, breaking the neck of the bull. It was exciting viewing, but the point here is that it was *need* which fuelled the prayer of the pagan. Across the ages, people pray to the gods so as to receive aid for impossible needs.

What is the judgment of man on his experience of the efficacy of the prayer of petition? I do not think it is possible to answer such a question, but what is obvious is that man keeps praying for the things that he needs. A further and more decisive question is, what is *God's attitude to our prayer of petition*? The answer to this is that God has

warmly encouraged us to pray for what we need. This is the clear testimony of revelation. He has not explicitly said that everything we ask for will be granted in the precise form we ask for it. But our Gospel passage today shows that our Lord wants us to ask for what we need, and encourages us to be confident that our prayers will be answered. But let us note that in the Gospels themselves our Lord does not grant every petition. But this is not to say that he does not answer the prayer. For instance, when the demoniac was cured in the land of the Gerasenes, he earnestly pleaded with our Lord to let him follow him (Mark 5:14-17). But our Lord refused the request. That is to say, he refused to grant the particular permission and course of action the demoniac had earnestly asked for. But he gave a very concrete answer to the prayer. He gave him an important mission, which was to return to his pagan region and speak about Jesus and what he had done. Who else could do this, and with such effect? The cured demoniac proceeded (doubtlessly in a spirit of obedience and gratitude) to fulfil this mission he had been given to the Decapolis settlements (*deka* - ten; *polis* - city) of this region east of the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan. It

was an area greatly influenced by Greek culture, and what he did may have been one of the first proclamations of Jesus Christ to the world beyond the chosen people. Presumably it paved the way for a future and more complete proclamation. The ex-demoniac would not have received this mission which he fulfilled so well, *had he not made his prayer to Jesus*. Jesus asked him to do this precisely in response to his prayer. His request was answered but in the way our Lord knew was best, and the one-time demoniac, notoriously under the power of Satan before, became a kind of apostle of Jesus Christ. This happened *because he made his petition to our Lord*, who answered his prayer in God's way.

Our Lord wants us to present to him all our needs. "*Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.*" I remember one person who prayed for light and wrote applying for a position. He asked that God do what was best. Unaccountably, and for probably the first time in his life, he wrote the wrong post-box address on the envelope of application, and so his application was never received. The letter was

returned unopened and the date for applications had passed. He subsequently came to be grateful that his application had been prevented by this circumstance, and saw it as the answer to his prayer. Let us pray with confidence, then, for all our needs.

A Second Reflection: (John 16:23-28)

Faith St Alphonsus Liguori wrote that a common defect in our prayer is that we ask God for far too little. Throughout the gospels our Lord is being asked for favours. He, in turn, is asking for faith that he could and would grant their petitions. He wanted faith in him. Is it not true that we ask very little of God, and that we rarely keep on asking, with persistence? We give up on God, and it can easily be that we do not really believe that our Lord has the power or the interest to hear our prayer. We must ask for an increase of the little faith we have, and keep on asking for this increase. *Lord, I do believe. Help my unbelief!*

The Ascension of The Lord

At the Vigil Mass

Entrance Antiphon Ps 68 (67):33, 35 You kingdoms of the earth,
sing to God; praise the Lord, who ascends above the highest heavens;
his majesty and might are in the skies, alleluia.

Collect O God, whose Son today ascended to the heavens as the
Apostles looked on, grant, we pray, that, in accordance with his
promise, we may be worthy for him to live with us always on earth, and
we with him in heaven. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of
the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

At the Mass during the Day

Entrance Antiphon Acts 1:11 Men of Galilee, why gaze in wonder at
the heavens? This Jesus whom you saw ascending into heaven will
return as you saw him go, alleluia.

Collect Gladden us with holy joys, almighty God, and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving, for the Ascension of Christ your Son is our exaltation, and, where the Head has gone before in glory, the Body is called to follow in hope. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who believe that your Only Begotten Son, our Redeemer, ascended this day to the heavens, may in spirit dwell already in heavenly realms. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 46;

Ephesians 1:17-23 or Hebrews 9:24-28; Luke 24:46-53

Jesus said to his disciples, This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at

Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. (Luke 24: 46-53)

The Ascension It scarcely needs to be said that one distinguishing feature of man as against the animal is that man can reflect on the world, and reach – to a point – an objective *understanding* of it. The animal lives in the world with awareness, but *without understanding*. I mention this merely as an introduction to the point that while man is capable of understanding, so often he does not seek to understand, nor even to be aware of, very many of the truly ultimate questions about the world. Let us take one ultimate question, Where is the world heading? That is to say, what is its *ultimate* term? When such a question is asked, the reply would usually be in terms of the world's

immediate future. The world is heading for a nuclear war, or for terrible problems of climate change, or for a collision with a great meteor, or for the catastrophe of over-population, or for rampant terrorism, or for an economic downturn. All of these possibilities relate to the next century or so, rather than to man's *ultimate* end. The question I have just posed asks, what is the *ultimate* term of the world's ongoing history? The fact is that while we do *not* know whether the world will suffer a global warming that will threaten so much of life, we *do* know exactly where the world is ultimately heading. It is heading towards the Judgment by Christ. This will be the final cosmic event and it will involve every person who has ever lived on the face of the earth. It will be the end of the world as we know it, and the beginning of eternity as the common state of all and of a transformed world. The coming of Christ as Lord and Judge will mark the end of the world. Now, this is all part of the meaning of Christ's ascension into heaven, where he took his seat at the right hand of the Father. As we read in our Gospel today (Luke 24: 46-53), Christ ascended into heaven. As we read elsewhere, he took his seat at the right hand of the

Father. He is Lord of all lords and our High Priest who constantly intercedes for us before the Father. Together with the Father, he sends us his Spirit and he gives us the hope of being with him forever in heaven.

The Ascension into heaven marks the formal conferring on Jesus Christ of his lordship over heaven and earth, and the beginning of his active exercise of it. He will exercise this lordship at the final Judgment. The Kingdom of God has come, and the King is Jesus Christ risen from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father. As the Lord of the cosmos and of all history and as the Head of his Church, the glorified Christ remains on earth invisibly within his Church. There his kingdom is already present in its beginning. One day he will return in glory, but we do not know the time. Because of this we live in watchful anticipation. He will come to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. It will mark the final cosmic upheaval of this passing world, with Christ's coming dominating everything. Christ will hand the world and all that is in it over to his Father, with his

redemptive and sanctifying work now done. The final coming of Christ and his judgment on all the nations will result in the definitive triumph of God. Christ will judge all the nations and every individual with the power he gained as the Redeemer of man who came to bring salvation to all. The secrets of hearts will be brought to light as well as the conduct of each one towards God and towards his neighbour. Everyone, according to how he has lived, will either be filled with life or damned for eternity. In this way "the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4: 13) will come about in which "God will be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15: 28). All of these great truths revealed to us by God and brought to Christ's faithful in the teaching of his Church, rise before our minds as we think of Jesus Christ ascending to heaven, with his disciples gazing on. He left the earth with his work done, but with a new work about to begin. That work was the evangelization of the world. The resurrection appearances included the commissioning of his disciples to make disciples of all the nations. So then, we know what the end of the world will be. The question is, how can we prepare for it? We prepare for it by embracing faith in Jesus Christ, by being

baptized into him, by acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord in the way we live our daily life, and by bringing this Good News to those about us.

As the disciples stand gazing on Jesus in wonderment as he rises from the earth and is enveloped in cloud from their sight, let us take our place with them. They have come a long way since their meeting with him soon after his baptism by John. They were privileged to have known the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the Redeemer of man and the Son of God. Now, the Good News is that we are in Christ by our baptism. We are intimately united to him by the power of God's grace, coming to us in the Sacraments. Let us live lives consistent with our being in him.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.668-679

(He will come again as judge)

A Second Reflection appears on the following page:

A Second Reflection: (Luke 24:46-53)

Jesus is Lord Today, the feast of the Ascension, we think of Jesus our brother and leader occupying the highest heaven in glory, seated at the very right hand of God. In him the human race has won the victory over Satan and sin and entered the highest glory. Great, then, is the dignity of man now, to have a brother who is God and living in glory at the side of the Father of all. In him the path to eternal life and to an eternity face to face with God has been offered us. At his Incarnation, Christ left his glory behind and became as men are, and lowlier still. Now in heaven, as this same man he is filled with divine glory. While he left us in his visible presence, this does not mean that he has simply left us. He cannot forget us, for we are members of his body. Just as the husband is one body with his spouse, so is Christ one body with his Church, of which we are members. St Therese of Lisieux said that she would spend her time in heaven doing good on earth. In this she merely reflects her Master in glory, Jesus Christ. Our Lord said, *my Father is always working, therefore so do I*. He who is with us

always and to the end, works constantly for our sanctification and salvation.

In fact that is the reason why he returned to his Father, to be with us more intimately, and to complete his work of redeeming and sanctifying us. He said, *Unless I go, the Paraclete will not come to you*. In his coming, the Spirit glorifies Jesus by sanctifying us and the world. Jesus, no longer limited to a particular geographic spot, by the power of the Holy Spirit is with us wherever we may be. He is present in the Church, teaching and proclaiming his Word. He is present in the Church's sacraments, especially the Eucharist. And as we read in today's Gospel (Luke 24:46-53), he is present inspiring the Church's members to engage generously in the mission of bringing others into a personal contact with him. *'In his name,'* we read, *'repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.'* All of this became possible by his ascending into glory at the right hand of the Father. Now nothing need separate us from him, save our deliberate and unrepented sins. Jesus in glory with his Father

is now closer to us than ever before. The Father, Son and Spirit make their home with us. Let us then cultivate this closeness and this union with him.

As we think of the Ascension, let us resolve to love and serve the heavenly Jesus who is ever present with us in the Eucharist and in the life of the Church his body, and let us do all we can to bring him to the world. For the day is coming when he will come again, this time as our Judge.

A Third Reflection: (Ephesians 1:17-23)

"Now as he blessed them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven." (Lk 24:46-53)

Man-God Our Lord's first recorded words on rising from the dead were to Mary Magdalene, and he told her he was ascending to his Father. The verb is in the present tense, implying an action very soon. It suggests that our Lord ascended in some sense to his heavenly Father on the day of his Resurrection, though of course it was not

definitive nor visible to several – as was his Ascension forty days later, which we celebrate today. We might even say that the Ascension of Christ began on the day of the Resurrection and reached its final moment at the Ascension narrated in today's Gospel. Now risen, the man Christ *acts* divinely, not just at times but as the normal pattern. He *appeared* to the two on the way to Emmaus and then *disappeared* – he did not act this way during his public ministry. That evening he *appeared* to the Eleven and *breathed* on them the gift of the Holy Spirit – somewhat reminiscent of *God breathing* into Adam the breath of life. Throughout the Old Testament it was *God* who gave the Holy Spirit to the prophets and certain great figures such as David. It is now *Jesus* who gives the Holy Spirit. Also, in giving the Eleven this great Gift, Our Lord gave them the power to forgive sins, something only *God* could do. Our Lord, true man as he was, was now acting constantly as God, filled as he was with divine power and life, no longer limited by a normal human condition. At our Lord's next meeting with the Eleven, the unbelieving Thomas acknowledged him as Lord and God. That is to say, when we think of Christ as now ascended

to the right hand of the Father, we think of him as the all-powerful God – while being man – and as *acting* as God.

So it is that St Paul, in referring to our Lord's Ascension in his letter to the Ephesians, says that the Father's "*power was at work in Christ, when he used it to raise him from the dead and to make him sit at his right hand, in heaven, far beyond every Sovereignty, Authority, Power or Domination, or any other name that can be named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. He has put all things under his feet, and made him as the ruler of everything, the head of the Church; which is his body, the fullness of him who fills the whole of creation.*" Today we think of the risen Lord's final meeting with his disciples as they watched him ascending to heaven. There is an important detail St Luke mentions here: *they worshipped him*, for it was obvious that he, the man Jesus, was *God*. Together with the Father he was soon to show his divine and saving power again, by sending the Holy Spirit to the infant Church, empowering it to begin its public work of preaching the forgiveness of sins in his name, and of bearing witness

to all he had done and would continually do for us his disciples. Because Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, he is now the head of the Church everywhere. Together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he abides in the soul of every baptised person in the state of grace. Precisely because Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father, acting now constantly as God, he is intimately close to each of us as God would be. He does this by the power of the Holy Spirit whom he and the Father have given to each of the baptised.

The thought of his Ascension reminds us that, acting now with divine power, he lives in each of us, working for our sanctification.

A fourth reflection: (Ephesians 1:17-23)

"May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see what hope his call holds for you, ... and how infinitely great is the power that he has exercised for us believers." (Ephes. 1:17 23)

Divine Power The Ascension of our Lord into heaven sets forth the truth that Jesus our Brother and our Redeemer, so close to us still in the

life and teaching of the Church, in the Sacraments (especially the Eucharist) and in so many ways, is the Ultimate in greatness and power and perfection. He is seated at the right hand of the Father, which is to say he is equal to the Father in every way except that he is not the Father. In Jesus we have access to everything we truly need. Our brother Jesus is actually God, at the right hand of the Father. So we can rely on Jesus. We need go no higher, we need go to no one or nothing else. As Pope Benedict XVI often put it, the face of the Father is Jesus. As Pope Francis put it, “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy” (*Misericordiae Vultus*). Jesus is all we need for our life's task of preparing for his coming. There is a certain simplicity to life, despite all its complexities: It is Jesus. In Jesus Christ we have immediate access to all the power and assistance we need, weak as we are of ourselves. By his Incarnation, Jesus became as we are and even lowlier still, dying on a cross. But by the power of the Holy Spirit God our Father raised him up. The resurrection of Christ was a striking sign of God's power. As St Paul says in our second reading for today (Ephesians 1:17 23) "*This you can tell from the strength of his power at*

work in Christ, when he used it to raise him from the dead and to make him sit at his right hand in heaven, far above any Sovereignty, Authority, Power or Domination, or any other name that can be named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. He has put all things under his feet, and made him as the ruler of everything, the head of the Church, the fullness of him who fills the whole of creation."

We have access to that power. The Ascension of Christ to the right hand of the Father is a great manifestation of the power of God. This same power conferred on us by the gift of the Holy Spirit, enables us to follow in the footsteps of Christ. So when we think of the Ascension of Christ to the right hand of the Father, we ought think that, – I can learn to follow Jesus because a portion of that *same power* at work in Jesus is available to *me*. It is the grace of Christ available to me in the ministry of the Church. I can follow in the footsteps of Jesus. I can combat sin. I can follow the suffering Christ and rise with him and be with him where he now is. Despite all the failures in my life, in my job and whatever, despite all the battles and the

disappointments life brings, by the power and the grace of God I can win the war against sin and get to heaven. God's kingdom, his rule, can be established in my own heart and I can help to establish it in the hearts of others. How? *By the power of God.* This is our great hope. Jesus is at the right hand of God and I can hope to be with him in heaven by following in his footsteps here on earth. How? *Through the grace of God* and my efforts inspired and sustained by that grace. As St Paul says in the second reading, "*May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see what hope his call holds for you, what rich glories he has promised we shall inherit and how infinitely great is the power he has exercised for us believers.*" As we think of Christ ascending to the right hand of the Father, let us renew our faith in God's power, thinking of all that Christ did for us, and where he now is even though he is close to each of us.

God can get us to heaven, he can help us to follow him ever more closely in how we think, in what we say and in what we do. Let us be sure to use the means: assiduous prayer, the sacraments, the

ministry of the Church through which Christ comes to me, resolving to lead a good life and striving daily to love Jesus.



Seventh Sunday of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26): 7-9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; of you my heart has spoken: Seek his face; hide not your face from me, alleluia.

Collect Graciously hear our supplications, O Lord, so that we, who believe that the Saviour of the human race is with you in your glory, may experience, as he promised, until the end of the world, his abiding presence among us. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 96;
 Apocalypse 22:12-14.16-17.20; John 17:20-26

Jesus said, It is not for them only do I pray, but for them also who through their word shall believe in me. That they all may be one, as you, Father, in me, and I in you; that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that you have sent me. And the glory which you have given me, I have given to them: that, they may be one, as we also are

one. I in them, and you in me: that they may be made perfectly one: and the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them, as you have also loved me. Father, I will that where I am, they also whom you have given me may be with me: that they may see my glory which you have given me, because you have loved me before the creation of the world. Just Father, the world has not known you: but I have known you. And these have known that you have sent me. And I have made known your name to them and will make it known: that the love wherewith you have loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17: 20-26)

Our Relationality There are some emphases of the modern age that are admirable. One is the modern insistence on the *rights* of each individual. I have *rights*, as do *all others*, even the *least*. For a philosophical justification of human rights, many look to Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804). The moral philosopher James Griffin in stressing rights as the protection of personhood looks to Kant. John Rawls looks to Kant for his account of an international society protecting human

rights. Jurgen Habermas turns to Kant to explain the status of human rights. It is perhaps not by chance that the increase in theories of human rights is matched by a burgeoning of studies on Kant's political philosophy. Whatever about Kant's limitations, he did ground his understanding of human rights in the assumption that man is a creature of God. Thomas Jefferson (who diverged widely from orthodox Christianity, and who once wrote to his nephew, "Fix Reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion") considered that human rights are granted not by the state but by the Creator. Let us recognize this strength in modern culture (with its limitations). But what I wish to propose here is that the modern stress on individual rights is of a kind that nourishes a sense of *separate* individuality. The *individual* is typically the central unit of emphasis. It involves a *sense of self* that tends *not to begin* with the human being as being in an essential state of relationship with others and with the world. An essential and natural relationality is *not* the primary *given*. *I* have rights. *I* have freedom. So does each *other* person. But this sense of things views myself and others as *separate* individuals who *then* must

enter into relationships with others. This tendency towards individualism squares with the account of human rights by Thomas Hobbes (1788-1679). On Hobbes' reading, rights are grounded not so much in what God intends and effects, nor in a natural end or supreme good, but in the necessity of human desire (to, say, preserve one's life). I have a right to those things I am impelled to desire. Locke built on this and extended its range to liberty and property. Not only did this leave God out of the matter (and so contributed to the modern secular view of rights), but it effected, as the *starting point* for the sense of self, the *separateness* of each individual. It is *my* inseparable and unavoidable desire which gives *me* the *right* to what *I* need.

There were other intellectual currents which indirectly consolidated this stress on *separate individuality*. Notoriously, Rene Descartes (1596–1650) wants us to justify both personal certitude and objective certainties by starting with a very unusual perspective indeed. I set aside the objective world which I naturally know, and *begin* by thinking of my own *thinking*. There is one certainty that is

immediately given from the obvious fact that *I think*. It is that *I exist*. I think, therefore I am. Well, this starts by separating us from all that is external to us and from all with which and with whom we are in an immediate relationship. I start with myself and nothing else. This flawed beginning has led to enormous philosophical problems – but my point here is that it too has added significantly to our modern stress on *separate* individuality as a primary starting point. The fact is, of course, that we are indeed individuals as are all things. But we are not, in a primary sense, *separately* so. We find ourselves in the first instance *in relationships*. We are *individuals* who are essentially *relational*. This is the point I wish to make here about man. It would have been better for Descartes had he not started with my thinking about my thinking, but with the fact that I know the *external world* and that I am *acting* within it, upon it and with it. I am not just a thinking person but an acting person who, as a primary datum, is *essentially in relationship* with external reality and persons. This is how God has created us, this is how he wishes us to understand ourselves, and this is the foundation of something much more thrilling. For it is not just our

natural condition and end which is relational. Our supernatural condition and end is relational too – which brings us to our Gospel today (John 17: 20-26). *It is not for them only do I pray, but for them also who through their word shall believe in me. That they all may be one, as you, Father, in me, and I in you; that they also may be in us.* God intends that we be one in him: *as you, Father, in me, and I in you; that they also may be in us.* Our God-given relational nature is intended by our Creator to be fulfilled in our oneness with Jesus and the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our *natural relationality* has a supernatural end: union with the Holy Trinity. *I in them, and you in me: that they may be made perfectly one.* From the roots of our natural being we are called to the heights of fulfilment by and in union with God.

Looking at things from the perspective of human relationality, we can see that the plan of God is all of a piece. Our Lord has revealed that all of the Law and the Prophets can be summed up in the dual commandment that we love God with all our heart and, secondly, that

we love our neighbour as ourself. It is love which fulfils man, and it is love which pleases God. Our final judgment will revolve around this, and we have before us a constant model of what this means. Our model is Jesus Christ and those who have most closely imitated him – especially his most holy mother. *Learn from me*, Christ says. St Paul writes, imitate me *as I imitate Christ*. Let us then every day set out to love after the manner of Jesus Christ, appealing for his grace to do so.



Monday of the Seventh Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Acts 1: 8 You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon you, and you will be my witnesses, even to the ends of the earth, alleluia.

Collect May the power of the Holy Spirit come to us, we pray, O Lord, that we may keep your will faithfully in mind and express it in a devout way of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 19:1-8; Psalm 68:2-7ab; John 16:29-33

The disciples said to Jesus, Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God. You believe at last! Jesus answered. But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am

not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:29-33)

The World In the context of Church history, the early months of 2010 were notable. There was a worldwide attack by the press on the person of Pope Benedict XVI. This was initiated by senior columnist Laurie Goodstein's lead article in *The New York Times* and accompanied by the editorial. Press after press followed suit, taking their cues from *The New York Times*. In all of this the Pope himself was at the mercy of the media. It was like a runaway horse that had bolted before those who looked at the facts had time to put their boots on. William McGurn, opinion writer for *The Wall Street Journal* (April 6), showed what anyone who took care with the available sources could see, that in its treatment of Pope Benedict XVI, *The New York Times* (and by implication those that followed suit) lapsed seriously in its standards of journalism. The published response of Cardinal William J. Levada on March 26 also showed this. Now, what was the reaction

of Pope Benedict XVI to this rolling, confused and false gossip about him that filled the printed and electronic media? He said scarcely a thing, but let it rumble on till it spent itself somewhat. Had he said anything at all, it would have been characteristically misinterpreted and misreported, and the misperception about him caused by the press would have worsened. A close observer had the impression that Pope Benedict XVI was close to God and trusted in his power. The hand of the Lord was upon him as he readied himself to deal with the Church's problems and the scandals of many of its own. The most obvious, though not the only, example of this merciless media treatment was when in 1968 Pope Paul VI issued his famous Encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, reiterating the Church's condemnation of artificial birth control. The press of the world attacked and vilified him. Pope Paul VI is now beatified and his cause for Canonization is proceeding. In the specific matter of the treatment meted out to Pope Benedict XVI himself – as distinct from the matter of terrible scandals – we are reminded of our Lord's words in our Gospel today. *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you will*

have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:29-33).

One of the great blessings for the Church of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty first, has been the quality of her supreme pontiffs. They have been outstanding in talent and spiritual stature. They have been great examples of faith in Jesus Christ, and we may call it a golden age for the papacy. On the tomb of Saint Mary MacKillop in North Sydney there is written the powerful words, *Trust in God*. Pope Benedict XVI – holy, wise, learned and eminent as a disciple of Jesus Christ – trusted in God. He had no doubt of the power of Jesus Christ. In our Gospel today (John 16:29-33), our Lord exhorts his disciples to trust in him, whatever the world may bring, and indeed whatever their own limitations and failings may bring. *"But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone."* Our Lord predicted the failure of his disciples when his hour would come. They scattered and abandoned him when crisis and difficulty came. Time

and again there have been failures in the Church's members, but the ultimate Stay resides in the Church herself. That Stay is Jesus Christ, in whom is to be found the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Father is with him and he, Jesus, means his disciples to find peace in him. *"Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace."* In the world, too, they will have trouble, but – and this is the good news of the Gospel – he has overcome the world. *"But take heart! I have overcome the world."* Christ has broken the power of Satan. Even though his victory has to be brought to each generation and to each crisis of human living, the ultimate victory belongs to him. Those who take their stand with Christ can be sure of the final outcome, whatever be the trials of the moment. The sinner, aware of his abandonment of Christ, must take refuge in him again. The faithful Christian, buffeted because of the sins of those who abandon Christ, must take refuge in him. Christ is the refuge of man. In him all can take heart.

Let the Christian be confident, whatever be the vicissitudes of life. His confidence is not grounded in his gifts, his accomplishments, his access to means of influence. It is grounded in the power and the love of God. If God allows things to happen that cause great suffering and serious reversals to his Church, he continues nevertheless to be God. In Christ he has overcome the world, and following a passion there comes a resurrection. So then, Be of good heart! I, Jesus Christ, have overcome the world.



Tuesday of the Seventh Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 1: 17-18 I am the first and the last, I was dead and am now alive. Behold, I am alive for ever and ever, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty and merciful God, that the Holy Spirit, coming near and dwelling graciously within us, may make of us a perfect temple of his glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 20:17-27; Psalm 68:10-11, 20-21;
John 17:1-11a

After Jesus said this, he looked towards heaven and prayed: Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all mankind that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you

gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. (John 17:1-11a)

Life With good reason it is often stated that the study of history is an essential part of a true education. When we open the history books we see that history embraces a vast variety of perspectives. There is economic and political history, there is the history of science and philosophy, there is the history of religion. There have even been

published in Australia histories of bush fires. Now, as we think of the onward flow of history with its regimes, empires and states rising and falling, we could wonder if there is any unifying thread in it all. Is there a linchpin, or is history made up simply of a succession of distinct items that exert their influence on other things or persons? Is history nothing more than a succession or change, perhaps shaped by the conflict between what is in possession and what is rising to challenge it? There is Alexander, there is Caesar, there is Genghis Khan, there is Sulamein, there is Bonaparte. They come and they go, and history marches on as influenced and as influencing. *"One generation passes and another comes, but the world forever lasts. The sun rises and the sun goes down; then it presses on to the place where it rises Nothing is new under the sun."* Thus writes Qoheleth, in Ecclesiastes (1: 4-9). Is there a linchpin to give to human history a *meaning*? There certainly is, and the words of our Gospel passage today provide that linchpin. It is Jesus Christ, to whom all authority has been granted. He is the Lord of history. Addressing his heavenly Father, our Lord prays, *"Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over*

all mankind that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” The world has a King, a Lord, and the Father of all that is, has given to *him* the dominion of all things. All things, all empires, all that happens and will happen, occur under the eye of the One to whom has been given all authority. A second question flows from this. What is the purpose of the authority over the world possessed by Jesus Christ? The purpose is to bring life in abundance to all of God's children. *I have come that they may have life*, he said elsewhere.

Our Lord is more specific still on this central question. In history, mankind heaves and surges on, seeking a flourishing of life. It attempts to find it in a variety of things: wealth, pleasure, power, good work, whatever. How to live? How to live in a flourishing and happy way? These are the questions that electrify the energies of man in his history, and they exercise the minds of the thinkers of the ages. How are we to gain life in abundance both here and hereafter? That is the

question, and in our passage today our Lord gives us the answer. Eternal life is *knowing God and Jesus Christ* whom he has sent. This knowledge of God is not just any kind of knowledge open to man, as, for instance, even in the mere exercise of his conscience. Whenever he senses or judges there to be a moral obligation, he has a dim sense of the Lawgiver behind it. But this ordinary and natural knowledge of God is not what our Lord is referring to here. He means the knowledge of God open to man as a result of his supernatural revelation. The key to human history and the flourishing of mankind in its fundamental sense is the *knowledge and love of Jesus Christ*. The knowledge of Jesus Christ brings the truest and fullest knowledge of God, and constitutes life eternal. It is this which opens man to a share in the life of Jesus Christ, and this life of his is eternal life. If we know Jesus Christ, if we love him and live according to his commands, then *life* – the life lived by Jesus Christ – will be ours. Ultimately, the plan of God for mankind is to share in the life of Jesus Christ by truly knowing him. It is this which we must work on and it is this which we must bring to others by our own work, by our

example, and by our discrete and alert use of any opportunities that come our way to spread the knowledge and love of him. The first thing we ought do on rising each day, is re-establish our relationship with Jesus Christ. It ought become a daily habit by disciplined prayer, thought, reading and service. The purpose of his supreme authority is in order that we might find life in his name.

It is not sufficient having a mere general appreciation of all this. We must get down to a specific plan of life that will make it possible for Jesus, the Lord of all lords, to begin to have dominion. Let us set aside real time for prayer each day, real minutes. It ought not simply be prayer on the run. Let us read about Jesus and his revealed truth, reading material that the Church sanctions. Let us endeavour to obey Jesus Christ in our everyday life and work. Let us build our lives on what Jesus Christ has revealed, because to him has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.

A Second Reflection: (Acts 20:17-27)

On the Holy Spirit Years ago a Scripture scholar and teacher asserted that the Holy Spirit is the hidden Person of the Blessed Trinity, almost in the shadows, as it were. In a certain sense this is correct: we cannot visualise him. He seems more elusive than the Father and the Son. His manifestations in Scripture are less direct (as a dove, as tongues of fire, etc.). But if we read the Acts of the Apostles attentively, searching to know more fully the Third Divine Person, we get a sense that the Holy Spirit is the principal protagonist in the infant Church. He is the great evangelizer and guide of evangelists. He is very much the Guide, the Director, the one who warns and forewarns. Consider our passage today (Acts 20:17-27): St Paul says that "*the Holy Spirit, in town after town, has made it clear enough that imprisonment and persecution await me.*"

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to help us know and love him more, to help us to be guided and inspired by him in our whole Christian life. Let us think of Mary, the first and greatest Christian, full of grace, filled with the Spirit of God. In the midst of an ordinary life, she was

led by the Holy Spirit constantly. *Come, Holy Spirit! Fill the hearts of your faithful! Enkindle in them the fire of your love!*



Wednesday of the Seventh Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46): 2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy, alleluia.

Collect Graciously grant to your Church, O merciful God, that, gathered by the Holy Spirit, she may be devoted to you with all her heart and united in purity of intent. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 20:28-38; Psalm 68:29-30, 33-36ab;

John 17:11b-19

Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said, Holy Father, keep true to your name those you have given to me so that they may be one as we are

one. While I was with them I kept true to your name those whom you gave me. I have watched over them so that none has been lost except the son of perdition, in fulfilment of the Scriptures. I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I dedicate myself, that they too may be dedicated in the truth. (John 17:11b-19)

In Christ I remember years ago when I was studying philosophy at university, the professor of the department, who happened to be the supervisor of my research, referred to one of his colleagues. He told me in passing that he was an Hegelian, a disciple of Hegel. There are those who are followers of the philosophy of Marx, Sartre, Wittgenstein,

Russell, Marcel and various others. The Catholic Church has recommended various of her philosophers, but especially the philosophy contained in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. In all of these cases, it is the man's thought and doctrine that is accepted and followed. One becomes a disciple of the man's *thought*, which is to say, his doctrine or teaching. The teacher himself – say, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Cicero, as the case may be – could be long since dead and therefore quite vanished as a living presence from the scene. It is his thought and teaching, expressed in the records of his writing, which continue to command influence. It is conceivable that a follower of Hegel's philosophy might have little interest in Hegel himself. Many have been enamoured of the philosophy of Frederick Nietzsche, but one would be hard put to see how many could be enamoured of Nietzsche himself. After a turbulent life he spent his last ten years virtually out of his mind. But notice how our Lord refers to his disciples. They must certainly follow his teaching with all their energies, but in the first instance, what counts is their relationship with *him*. This relationship is *God's* work. They have been given to Jesus

by the Father. "*Holy Father, keep true to your name those you have given to me so that they may be one as we are one.*" They belong to Jesus in order for him to care for them – so that he might keep them true to the Father's name. Every disciple of Christ may say that he belongs to Jesus. He finds himself as belonging to Jesus by the gift of the Father. He does not approach Jesus as one who is separated from him. He is already the gift of the Father to Jesus, and as this gift he receives the word of Jesus his master, a word to which he must adhere.

So the primary thing about being a disciple of Jesus Christ is being faithful to the personal relationship with Christ in which he has been placed by God himself. There is a more general observation to be made here about our fundamental situation. Following on the isolating perspective propounded by Descartes, modern man tends to regard himself as being, in the first instance, isolated, apart. His sense of self is marked by individualism. From his isolation and separation from other persons and things, he seeks relationships. Descartes began with the self that thinks in isolation. Descartes built his system from the

subject thinking about his own thinking. This confirms the fact of man's existence to himself, but this starting point isolates him from the world with which he must then establish a connection. Modern man prizes friendship, but he tends to come at it from a prior solitariness. It is this starting point that is so erroneous, and which has had such baleful effects on the philosophy of the last few centuries. Man's true starting point is not his isolated reflection on himself as a being who thinks. He should start from the evident fact of his being part of the world and in profound relationship with others. His relationships with others are a primary and fundamental given, that include his own action. He is an *acting* person, and not just a thinking one. His action is as one who is part of the external world and in deep relationships with others, such as his family and friends. He finds himself to be interconnected with others, and not in the first instance solitary and disconnected from the world. Hence our Lord's words in today's Gospel (John 17:11b-19) are part of a piece with the reality of human life as man finds it to be. The disciple of Jesus Christ learns from his Master that the Father has made of him a gift to his beloved Son: *Keep true to your name those you have*

given to me so that they may be one as we are one. We are, by God's gift, in relationship with Jesus. We are God's gift to Jesus who has given his life for us and for our salvation. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is from *this starting point of being in him* that we follow the teaching of him who is the Master.

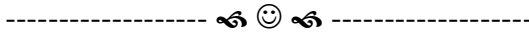
That having been said, it is more crucial that we adhere to the *teaching* of the Master, than it is for any disciple of any other philosopher or leader of thought and religion. If we do not follow his teaching, despite the gift the Father has made of us to the Son, we shall be lost. *"I have watched over them so that none has been lost except the son of perdition, in fulfilment of the Scriptures."* We must be faithful to the word of the Master. *"They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."* Let us then rejoice that we have by the grace of God been placed in Christ, and resolve to live in him by obedience to his word.

A Second Reflection (Acts 20: 28-38)

Submission to the Holy Spirit

At times one hears certain Christians (and certain Catholics too) professing to be devotees of the Holy Spirit, striving to be responsive to his lights and his promptings, while at the same time they allow little place in their spiritual lives for the Church and for the Church's guidance. But what do we see St Paul saying? Consider his words in Acts 20:28-38. He refers to the Holy Spirit as the one who made "the elders of the church of Ephesus" as the "overseers, to feed the Church of God which he bought with his own blood." That is to say, the responsibility carried and exercised by the Church's pastors comes from the Holy Spirit. They are to be on their "guard" against "men coming forward with a travesty of the truth ... to induce the disciples to follow them." This is what the Church's pastors are called to do, and for which many criticise them. They are to watch, feed, and warn the flock.

If we aspire to be submissive to the Holy Spirit (as we must, if we wish to be truly Christian), we must also be submissive to the Church which is Christ's creation.



Thursday of the Seventh Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Hebrews 4: 16 With boldness let us approach the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace as a timely help, alleluia.

Collect May your Spirit, O Lord, we pray, imbue us powerfully with spiritual gifts, that he may give us a mind pleasing to you and graciously conform us to your will. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 22:30; 23:6-11; Psalm 16:1-2a and 5, 7-11;

John 17:20-26

Jesus prayed, My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I

in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them. (John 17:20-26)

The Foundations It seems that the great thinkers of mankind can be divided into two groups. There are those who aimed at constructing a system of thought, and there are those who achieved great originality in a few chosen areas and who did not concern themselves with developing a system. Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages achieved a system of thought that was remarkable, and the Church has pointed to him as a very good guide in respect to the synthesis between Faith and Reason. Another great Christian thinker was John Henry Newman, the

English convert and priest of the nineteenth century. He did not offer a system in his writings, but rather achieved his eminence because of his originality in a few chosen areas. One thing Newman repeatedly stressed was the importance for thought of our starting points – our first principles, where we are coming from. A system of thought does not *begin* with reason, but it is *developed* by reason. That is to say, reason takes the starting points of a person's thought and life, and develops them by reasoning from (what he takes to be) the known to the unknown. Newman accounts for the wide divergence among people in large measure to their divergence in the matter of *first principles or starting points*. It would seem that most people have no idea where they are coming from and what are the assumed starting points of their thought and life. Nor is there much wrong with this, because it can at times be very difficult, if not impossible, to know what are all our starting points or assumed fundamental truths. They are just part of us; we take them for granted; their truth is so obvious to us that we scarcely advert to them. The question becomes serious, though, when our first principles are quite false and lead to a false attitude to the world. For

instance, if considerable numbers of a world religion have a hostile attitude to the rest of the world and see themselves as justified in waging a campaign of terrorism on other societies, all the while invoking the One they worship, then their starting points, their assumed truths, have become lethal.

Let us consider features of this last instance. Let us imagine a person whose basic starting point is that he has been granted "the truth" and that "the truth" – i.e., the truth that is in his possession – is supreme. The "truth" must be acknowledged by all – he thinks – and those who refuse thus to acknowledge it, lose their rights and dignity before the supreme dignity and rights of truth. Thus it is that because of his view *on truth*, he is hostile to the world because he discovers that the world does not agree with him. The roots of his attitude to the truth probably lie in his moral life. But let us take another case. A person is convinced that he has been granted "the truth," and that this truth is supreme. But there is a second starting point to his thought and life, one that is probably of equal importance to the first. It is that he is in

communion with God and with others. He is not alone with his truth, with others cut off from him by their disagreement – or, rather, by their antagonism because of their disagreement with him. Rather, *he is in communion* with all to a greater or lesser extent, and this *fact of communion*, just as with the fact of his having the truth, is a fundamental reality that constitutes a fundamental duty. The duty is to remain in communion and to foster it to the extent possible. He perceives that it is only when this communion with others, that is a basic fact of life and reality, is respected, that one's "truth" can flourish and spread among men. This first principle, this starting point, this fact from which he is coming, shapes his life in the world of men and societies, as does his respect for the supremacy of the truth. He is not, then, intolerant, but *in dialogue and communion with others*, precisely over the truth. Thus does communion advance, as well as the recognition of the truth. A great deal depends on where we are coming from, our first principles, our basic starting points. Now, what are the starting points, the fundamental facts on which our lives ought be based, according to the words of Jesus Christ? They are precisely the

ones I have just mentioned: fidelity to the truth he has revealed, and the communion *that we have been granted* with him and the Father.

Let us listen to our Lord's beautiful words. *"Jesus prayed, My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me"* (John 17:20-26). The message of Jesus Christ is supreme, as is our communion with one another and with God. Let us look at these basic truths of life as they come to us from Jesus Christ our Redeemer and our God, and let us make them the foundation of life.



Friday of the Seventh Week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 1: 5-6 Christ loved us and washed us clean of our sins by his Blood, and made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, alleluia.

Collect O God, who by the glorification of your Christ and the light of the Holy Spirit have unlocked for us the gates of eternity, grant, we pray, that, partaking of so great a gift, our devotion may grow deeper and our faith be strengthened. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 25:13b-21; Psalm 103:1-2, 11-12, 19-20ab;
John 21:15-19

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Yes, Lord, he said, you know that I love you. Jesus said, Feed my lambs. Again Jesus said, Simon son of John, do you truly love me? He answered, Yes, Lord, you

know that I love you. Jesus said, Take care of my sheep. The third time he said to him, Simon son of John, do you love me? Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, Do you love me? He said, Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you. Jesus said, Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, Follow me! (John 21:15-19)

Love for Jesus Christ's rising from the dead included more than a sense of triumph over death and the joy of his disciples at his gaining this victory. What was also prominent was his sense of mission. On appearing to the Eleven our Lord gave them a share in the peace that was his: "*Peace be with you,*" he said to them, and he then showed them his hands and his side. He was back from the grave. But then he immediately entrusted them with a share in his mission: "*As my Father*

sent me, so am I sending you.” St John is specific about that point. Having proved that he was back with them in the flesh, he gave them their great work, together with the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable them to fulfil it. Our Gospel passage today is drawn from the next chapter of St John, and it would appear to be an (inspired) addition to the original text. It speaks especially of Peter and his mission, but of course as part of the portrayal of Jesus Christ now risen from the dead. So let us consider what our Lord's words to Peter reveal to us of Jesus himself. Firstly and above all, the mission our Lord is entrusting to Peter requires a personal *love for him*. We do not see this demanded by other great religious founders – though, being human, they implicitly expected to be loved. But in the case of Jesus Christ, *love for him* is an essential requirement of the mission of spreading the Gospel throughout the world. This mission could only be prosecuted by those who loved him dearly. The "doctrine" of the Gospel is above all his own Person. It is *he* who is to be loved and obeyed, and this is done in the total acceptance of his doctrine. Peter himself, chief pastor of the flock, must love Jesus totally. This point is made by our Lord three times, and

is singularly clear. *"When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Yes, Lord, he said, you know that I love you. Jesus said, Feed my lambs. Again Jesus said, Simon son of John, do you truly love me? He answered, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Jesus said, Take care of my sheep. The third time he said to him, Simon son of John, do you love me? Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, Do you love me?"*

Furthermore, let us notice the personal relationship between our Lord and all those to whom Peter and the Apostles were being sent on their mission. They were *Christ's sheep, his lambs*. During our Lord's public ministry, their mission – as was his own – was to the lost *sheep* of the House of Israel. Now, with his having risen from the dead, it is to the whole world. The whole *world* is Christ's flock, *his sheep, his lambs*. The Father has entrusted the world to him, and has given to him, as man, all authority in heaven and on earth. The purpose of this authority was to bring to glory all those entrusted to him. So not only is

there a personal relationship of love between Christ and the Apostles; not only must they themselves love him dearly and personally if they are to feed his sheep, but the sheep to which they are being sent belong to him. The entire flock belongs to him. He loves them individually and is determined to bring them to a share in his glory. The entire situation in which the Apostles and all of Christ's sheep are now immersed, is one of love. Christ loved Peter and the Twelve. He loved every one of his sheep, every one of his lambs. He asked for love in return from Peter and the Apostles, and love from each and all of his lambs – and the test of this love was the fulfilment of his commands. Thus is the Christian religion a very personal matter between each person and Jesus, but each person as inextricably part of the whole communion of all Christ's flock. Each of us is called to a personal love for Jesus Christ, not in isolation from others, but precisely as part of Christ's flock. Feed my sheep, feed my lambs, Christ said, referring to them in the plural. We are called to love Jesus Christ as members of his Fold. If we think of any other figure in all of the Scriptures, or indeed any other founder of religion in human history,

there is no one who claims such personal love from his followers as does Jesus Christ. He claims the same degree of love for himself as God claims.

Let us place ourselves in the Gospel scene today and hear our Lord's words to Peter as being addressed to each one of us: Do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know I love you! Do you love me, and are you determined to love me? Yes, Lord, you know I love you! Then feed my sheep – serve them by bringing them to a personal love for me and to a total acceptance of my teaching. Do you love me? Lord, you know all things, you know I love you! Then join with me in my mission to make disciples of all the nations, for all are called to find life in me. To the work, then!



Saturday of the Seventh Week of Easter

At the Morning Mass Entrance Antiphon Acts 1: 14 The disciples devoted themselves with one accord to prayer with the women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and his brethren, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who have celebrated the paschal festivities, may by your gift hold fast to them in the way that we live our lives. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 28:16-20, 30-31; Psalm 11:4, 5 and 7;
John 21:20-25

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, Lord, who is going to betray you?) When Peter saw him, he asked, Lord, what about him? Jesus answered, If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow

me. Because of this, the rumour spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (John 21:20-25)

Follow Me! One gets the impression that during our Lord's public ministry and its aftermath, Peter and John were especially close. The Gospels report that on various occasions our Lord took Peter, James and John apart with him as his closest associates. On the occasion of his raising the little girl from the dead, he had those three with him. During the Last Supper, it seems that John was on one side of our Lord, Peter on the other – for Peter signalled to John that he ask our Lord who was going to betray him. In his Agony in the Garden, Jesus had Peter, James and John with him. On Easter Sunday morning, it is *Peter and*

John who set off at a run making for the tomb, and together find it to be empty. John arrives at the tomb first, but waits and allows Peter to be the first to enter. They both love our Lord, and while John is the "one Jesus loved," the hint is that among the disciples it is Peter who loves our Lord the most. In the last chapter of the Gospel from which our passage today is drawn, it is Peter who, on seeing that it is our Lord on the shore, jumps into the water *ahead of the others*, and makes his way to the shore. On the shore, our Lord asks Peter if he loves him *more than do the others*, and though Peter does not himself claim this, it is certainly Christ's expectation. The hint is that in fact he does. That is to say, in the last chapter of St John's Gospel, what we might call the Johannine tradition places Simon Peter at the forefront of the Church in his assigned apostolic mission, in his calling to love Jesus more than the others, and in the death by which he would give glory to God. In the memory and thought of John, Peter seems to be leader and exemplar of Christ's disciples – despite his faults. There is an obvious implication in this prominent vocation of Peter. It is that roles and vocations in Christ's Church vary, and this is so by divine plan. Some are called to

prominence, others are called to an ordinary and obscure path. Each person, though, is special in that each has his or her personal calling. The important thing in God's eyes is not that the calling one has received be prominent, but that *it be lived generously*.

It may be observed that our Lord's prophecy of Peter's death as given in this last chapter of John (John 21: 18-19), was not the only such prophecy granted to his disciples. During his public ministry our Lord had told them all that they must renounce themselves and take up their cross and follow him. Separately, he had told James and John that *they would indeed drink his cup*. So it is that Peter, having received his special calling and a hint as to his very death, notices the beloved disciple following as he and Jesus speak. Peter is curious – *what about him, Lord*, the one who has a special place in your heart, the one who is my friend too, this one who already has a certain prominence among the disciples? You have spoken of me. What is to be *his* path in your plan? Now, this question surely reflects questions that can arise in the hearts of many disciples of Christ, in many members of the

Church. We remember how during his public ministry, there were times when the disciples vied for positions of importance. When James and John asked our Lord for places at his right and left in his kingdom, the others were annoyed with them – for, they thought, they were trying to get special favours over and above them. Our Lord had to correct their propensity to compete for prominence. Does this not remind us of envy or at least of other less than worthy attitudes within the ranks of Christ's disciples? John the Baptist was told by his disciples that more were going after Jesus. He simply said that each must be content with the gift he has been given. Each must live his vocation to the full and not be distracted by the thought of the different, and perhaps more obviously effective and prominent vocation of the other. What about him, Lord? Simon asks. What will be his path? Our Lord's reply to this ever-recurring question, one that so often blunts and detracts from the heartfelt dedication that ought mark the path of each of us, is "*You are to follow me!*" Leave the other person's vocation to God, and praise God for his ways. Whatever be my plan for him, leave that to me. The

one thing necessary is that you fulfil your vocation to love and serve me to the utmost. *You are to follow me!*

Envy is an active force in society and even at times in Christ's Church. Pilate saw that it was due to envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. We read in the Wisdom of Solomon that *through the devil's envy death entered the world* (2:24). Let us not bemoan in our hearts the good fortune of others and the lack of good fortune in ourselves. Let us treasure the specific calling we each have received, with all its difficulty and disappointment. For his own inscrutable reasons, God has so disposed that we be as we are with the vocation that we have. We have only one life and it is the particular life that has been granted us. We must live it well, following the Master. Don't be looking at him, look at me! Leave him to me. *You are to follow me!*

A Second Reflection: Acts 28:16-20

Being Welcoming Some people seem to be bored with life. They have a lot of time on their hands. The Christian ought never be bored, for each day offers constant opportunities. For instance, we can take the opportunity to be truly welcoming in all our contacts with others. A welcoming hospitality brings the chance of introducing people to the Person of Christ. Consider St Paul under house arrest in Rome for two years (Acts 28:16-30). What did he do? *"He welcomed all who came to visit him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ"* (Acts 28:31). He welcomed all. He used the restricted conditions he was compelled to live in by extending to all who came to him a welcoming friendship, and used this friendship as the door to evangelization.

This gives us a key to apostolic success in everyday life, whatever be our circumstances. The medium of apostolic activity is to be genuine and welcoming friendship. We can exercise this at every contact we have with others. If we live in the presence of God, ever keeping in mind the mission we have from Christ, we shall be

motivated to be like St Paul in this respect. It will open the door to trust and to a readiness in others to listen to what we have to say of Christ.



Pentecost Sunday (Vigil Mass)

Entrance Antiphon: Rom 5;5; 8:11 The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit of God dwelling within us, alleluia.

Collect: Almighty ever-living God, who willed the Paschal Mystery to be encompassed as a sign in fifty days, grant that from out of the scattered nations the confusion of many tongues may be gathered by heavenly grace into one great confession of your name. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture for the Vigil Mass: Genesis 11:1-9 or Exodus 19:3-8. 16-20 or Ezekiel 37:1-14; or Joel 3:1-5; Romans 8:22-27; John 7: 37-39

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who

believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. (John 7: 37-39)

The Spirit of God Every Sunday after hearing the word of God in the readings and the homily we all recite the Nicene Creed (or the Apostles' Creed). In that Creed we all say, "*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken by the Prophets.*" So then, the Holy Spirit is the Lord. Although there are other spirits, such as the Angels who are ministers and messengers of God, the Holy Spirit is the Lord of all that is. He is God, just as truly as the Father is God and the Son is God. He is not only the Lord of all but the Giver of Life. The true life of the soul is not to be famous or wealthy, but to be united to God. It is the Holy Spirit who, by his grace, unites the soul to God. What, then, is his relation to the Father and to the Son? The Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. The Son is the Word of the Father and the Holy Spirit is the love between the Father and the Son. Therefore while

the Son is begotten of the Father, the Holy Spirit proceeds not just from the Father but from both the Father and the Son, for he is the love between the two. Moreover, just as the Son is the same divine being as the Father while being a distinct person from Him, so is the Holy Spirit the same divine being as the Father and as the Son, but is a distinct person from each of them. And for that reason he is adored and glorified equally with the Father and the Son. It is He, the Holy Spirit, who spoke through the prophets and inspired the Scriptures. So, whenever we read or hear the Scriptures we ought be open to the light and inspiration of the Holy Spirit who continues to speak to us through the prophets he inspired.

It is this same Holy Spirit who came at Pentecost to give birth to the Church. It is this same Holy Spirit whom we received at our baptism and confirmation, and who continually blesses us with his help through life. What then is the help through life that the Holy Spirit brings to us? The Holy Spirit cleanses us of our sins. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that our Lady was conceived free of original

sin, and it was by the grace of the Holy Spirit that she remained utterly sinless throughout her life. It was the Holy Spirit who by his grace, together with her own cooperation, made her all holy. He cleanses and repairs by his grace, which is available to us in the sacraments – especially in the Sacrament of Baptism, and then subsequently in the Sacrament of Penance – and in prayer. The Holy Spirit also enlightens our minds. Our Lord said at the Last Supper, "*the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name will teach you all things and bring to your mind whatever I have said to you.*" The Holy Spirit also assists us to keep God's commandments. Our Lord said, "*If any one love me he will keep my word.*" The Holy Spirit makes our hearts like the heart of God. Through the words of the Prophet Ezekiel, God said: "*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will take away the heart of stone that is within you and I will put my spirit into you. I will cause you to walk in my commandments.*" He counsels us when we are in doubt, and teaches us what is the will of God. As we read in the book of the Apocalypse, "*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.*" The Holy Spirit also strengthens us

in the hope of eternal life. He is himself the surety we have of eternal life. Of course, we must live as God's children if heaven, which is intended for us, is finally to be gained. As St Paul says, "*You have received the spirit of sonship whereby we cry out 'Father, dear Father'.*" For the Holy Spirit himself testifies to us that we are children of God. So the Holy Spirit gives us every reason to hope for heaven.

Whenever we recite the Nicene or Apostles' Creed let us proclaim our faith in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified. It is He who leads us to holiness by his grace. Let us pray, *Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your divine love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth. Let us also pray, O God who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant by the same Holy Spirit that we may be truly wise and ever rejoice in his consolations, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Pentecost Sunday (Mass During the Day)

Entrance Antiphon Wis 1: 7 The Spirit of the Lord has filled the whole world and that which contains all things understands what is said, alleluia.

Or:

Romans 5: 5; cf. 8: 11 The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit of God dwelling within us, alleluia.

Collect O God, who by the mystery of today's great feast sanctify your whole Church in every people and nation, pour out, we pray, the gifts of the Holy Spirit across the face of the earth and, with the divine grace that was at work when the Gospel was first proclaimed, fill now once more the hearts of believers. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 103;

1 Corinthians 12:3-7.12-13; John 14:15-16.23-26

Jesus said to his disciples, If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever. If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:15-16.23-26)

The Spirit One of the most fundamental features of the world that we experience is that it *changes*. It is a *changing* reality – which means that the world cannot be the *ultimate* reality for it develops and declines. The human person is changing continually too, but in his case the change that is all-important is moral change. It is at this level that he changes for the better or for the worse in what is distinctive to him as a human being. It is the goal of life to change for the better. Imagine a

young man who is aimless, bored and full of feelings of hostility. He meets a group of splendid young people who have purpose and direction in their lives. They offer him friendship and the group begins to affect him with their spirit, leading him to move in their direction in life. Let us try to imagine the goodness of every saint and moral hero concentrated and available at a single point. Imagine all this goodness as a Person who is the source of all the goodness that there is. Suppose that this Person were to come to a group and to abide within them, empowering them by his assistance to become good themselves. We are speaking of the Holy Spirit and his coming. Today, Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the infant Church, including the mother of Jesus and the apostles. Both individually and together they received the Holy Spirit, not necessarily for the first time (for of course our Lady had been filled with the Holy Spirit since her conception) but for the first time precisely as Christ's infant Church. They had been told by our Lord to await – not just individually but together – what the Father had promised. The promised Gift came, and the Church as such was born. The Holy Spirit

became the Church's soul, animating and vivifying her members, and making of them one body – the body of Christ her head. Mary, present among them and receiving the Holy Spirit anew as a member of the Church, became the mother and model of the Church, forever bound to the Church in this capacity. All this was the direct result of the gift of the Spirit. And of course, with his coming, this third divine Person was thus wonderfully revealed. He revealed himself publicly as it were, and in power.

The *Acts of the Apostles*, in which we read of this event of Pentecost, is the story of the action of the Holy Spirit. Just as it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that the second divine Person became man, so too it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ's Catholic Church was born and continues as the body of Christ in the world. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the Church is now and will be to the end of time the sacrament of Christ, the sign and instrument whereby Jesus is made present among us and brings salvation to the ends of the earth. As the Holy Spirit led Jesus, so he leads his body the

Church, and he leads the Church's members to live in active union with the Church. This gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit, is an inestimable gift of God to mankind. It is available through the ministry of the Church. Without the Holy Spirit, man would be sunk in his sins, as St Paul says in Romans, and doomed to death. The Holy Spirit is the love of the Father and the Son, uniting them both. It is this love which is the source of all possible life and goodness, including the goodness of God himself. The task of every member of the Church is to be led by this divine Person, just as Christ was led by him. We must get into the way of thinking that he is with us to guide us and to inspire us. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit is the divine Person who brought the Church to birth at Pentecost and then sustains her life and mission through history, if we wish to be led by the Holy Spirit, we must be led precisely as members of the Church, in union with her, and subject to her lead. Now, through what medium, through what immediate instrument at hand, does he lead us? He does this generally through our consciences enlightened by the teaching and witness of the Church, who is herself guided by the Holy Spirit. He dwells within us to guide our consciences, to inspire us to be

faithful to Christ and his Church. Let us then resolve to be his true friend, and not, as St Paul says, to make him sad by failing to know well what Christ teaches by means of the Church, and then by failing to put this teaching assiduously into practice.

Come Holy Spirit! Fill the hearts of your faithful! Enkindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and by means of your Spirit lead us to holiness of life!

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.731-741

A Second Reflection (Acts 2:1-11)

Our Companion Many years ago it was observed that the Holy Spirit, the precious Gift that the Father and the Son have sent us, had become a little forgotten. It is the Holy Spirit who inspired the prophets and holy men of the Old Testament. It was he who inspired the writing of the Sacred Scriptures themselves. It was he who filled Mary the mother of Christ with grace. It was by his power that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. It was he who filled the soul of the

child Jesus, who daily advanced, humanly speaking, in wisdom and grace. It was he who came upon our Lord again and in a new way at his baptism, leading him thenceforth in his public ministry, a ministry mighty in word and in works. It was he who led Jesus to his Passion, and it was by his power that Christ offered himself as a victim to the Father on our behalf. It was by his power that Christ rose from the dead. So important was the Holy Spirit in the divine plan that our Lord said to his grieving apostles that it was better for them that he go, because unless he did go the Holy Spirit would not come. For some reason known only to God, our Lord had to depart from us visibly and ascend to the right hand of the Father before the Holy Spirit could be sent to the Church at large, and begin his own proper mission in the Church's life. There was so much that the Apostles and disciples had not and could not grasp while our Lord was still with them, despite all our Lord's teaching, and all his patience and explanations. Even when our Lord was risen, they still mistook him and his true mission. The infant Church which our Lord had founded to the point of his resurrection and ascension was as yet embryonic. It needed the gift of

the Holy Spirit, as the seed needs the downpour of rain, for it to burst into life-bearing fruit.

This is what happened at Pentecost, as we read in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The Holy Spirit came with a powerful noise and tongues of fire. With that they were empowered to bear witness to Jesus in numerous tongues. While the Gospels portray the person and work of the Redeemer, the Acts of the Apostles could be said to show the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the infant Church. The Holy Spirit is the third divine Person, and is just as truly the one God as is the Father and the Son, just as much to be worshipped and adored as they. He is therefore the greatest gift the Father and the Son could possibly confer on the Church. It was at Pentecost that this Gift was given to the Church, and with that Gift the Church was born and became publicly active. He was given to the Church to enlighten, guide and sanctify her. He has been given to each of us, to enlighten, guide and sanctify us. He abides in each of us as in his temple, provided we are in the state of grace. He is therefore our constant

Companion, our divine Friend, our Guide and our Sanctifier. He gives effect to our undertakings and our efforts, and enables our fidelity to Jesus to bear fruit that will last. He is our Companion, Friend and Guide far more than any angel or saint, and is present with us in all his divine power. Let us then ask ourselves, Do we think much of this divine, all powerful Companion that Christ and the Father have given us? Do we make any effort to get to know him, to be devoted to him, to be inspired by him and to learn from him? He wishes to make us saints, yet we so often make him sad by our sins. It is quite possible scarcely to think of the Holy Spirit, except when he is celebrated in the Church's feasts.

Let us resolve to take practical steps to learn to be guided by him in our Christian life. He wants to lead us to the truth and to the perfection of love. He is with us daily for this express purpose. We must resolve to listen to the Holy Spirit and to be sensitive to his promptings. Let us determine to meditate on our Lord's words about him, read of him in the Scriptures, expect him to enlighten our

understanding and our conscience, and recognise his action after it has occurred. Our daily goal ought to be to be submissive to the Holy Spirit, in imitation of our Lord himself and all the saints.



Season

of

Ordinary Time



The Most Holy Trinity Sunday

Entrance Antiphon Blest be God the Father, and the Only Begotten Son of God, and also the Holy Spirit, for he has shown us his merciful love.

Collect God our Father, who by sending into the world the Word of truth and the Spirit of sanctification made known to the human race your wondrous mystery, grant us, we pray, that in professing the true faith, we may acknowledge the Trinity of eternal glory and adore your Unity, powerful in majesty. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Proverbs 8:22-31; Psalm 8;
 Romans 5: 1-5; John 16:12-15

Jesus said to his disciples: "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only

what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.” (John 16: 12-15)

One And Three It needs scarcely to be observed that in human history polytheism has been characteristic of most of the religions of man. But man is blessed in having received a divine revelation, and we have come to know that God is only one. He is one in a way we and all other things are not, for we are not simply one. We are complex - we have a mind, a will, a body, and various other elements, and we could and will lose many of these components. God simply is, and everything that God is – his love, his power, his goodness, his knowledge – is simply God. There is nothing about God which God could cease to possess, because whatever he "has," he simply is. Because he *simply is*, he is all that he is without limitation. But God has revealed that while in being he is simply one, in person he is not one but three. God is

three divine Persons each of whom is the same one divine Being. Jesus Christ is God's only Son. He is God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. In this there are not two divine Beings, but only one. The Son is the one same God that the Father is, but he is not the same Person as the Father. He is the Father's only-begotten Son. The Father did not become man and die on the Cross for us. Rather, the Father sent the Son to do this for us. We also believe in the Holy Spirit who is the Lord and Giver of life and who proceeds from the Father and the Son. He is the divine love which unites them both – not, though, a mere impersonal divine force or quality, but every bit a Person as is the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. That is, just as the Father is the one God, and just as the Son is the same one God, so the Holy Spirit, a third and distinct Person, is the one God too. There is only one God and he is utterly one in his being. Yet there are three distinct Persons, each of whom is the one God. Jesus taught us to address our Father in heaven. When we speak to God our Father, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we speak as

brothers and sisters of Jesus our Redeemer and God, living by the love of the Holy Spirit, given us by the Father and the Son.

This is the Sunday of the year when we honour the most profound and central mystery of the Christian Faith, the mystery of the holy Trinity. If we do not accept that God is one Being and three Persons, we cannot count ourselves as Christians. In the Collect of today's Mass we say, *"God our Father, who by sending into the world the Word of truth and the Spirit of sanctification made known to the human race your wondrous mystery, grant us, we pray, that in professing the true faith, we may acknowledge the Trinity of eternal glory and adore your Unity, powerful in majesty."* The Son and the Holy Spirit have been sent to us with distinct though ineffably interrelated missions. They alone are sent. The Son is sent by the Father. The Spirit is sent to us by both the Father and the Son. The Father is not sent to us on a mission, for he is the divine origin of the other two divine Persons. All three are equally God, yet the Father is the origin of the other two, not in time, for all are equally eternal, but in

their Personhood. The Son is eternally generated by the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from both as their love. Their relations one to the other vary, but in being they are identical. While in one sense the Son, precisely as Son, looks to the Father with humble reverence as having been generated by him, he is in no way inferior to the Father in his being, because, precisely as God, his being is that of the Father. In this sense, and in this sense alone, are we to understand Christ's words, "*The Father is greater than I*," for our Lord says in another place, "*The Father and I are one*", and again, "*He who sees me sees the Father*." All three Persons are one in power, divinity, knowledge, eternity – qualities of their very being. We each of us, because of our baptism, share in the life of this same one and triune God. There is a principle of life within us which is beyond the natural human life into which we were born. This divine life in which we share, the life of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the source of that holiness to which we are called. It is the power of God enabling us to be sanctified. This is the will of God, St Paul writes, your sanctification. Our sanctification is possible because we share in the life of the Blessed

Trinity. So let us today thank God for revealing himself to us and calling us to an eternity with him.

Let us do all things in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Thus they were in the beginning, are now and will be forever. Glory, then, be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and shall be forever. Let us cultivate a profound devotion to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. If we do this, we share in the very life of God.

A Second Reflection: John 16:12-15

The Trinity Every one of us is born into a family, and our family life, such as it is, has a profound effect on us. As we all know, a key to the understanding of any person is to know and understand that person's family. But the human family ultimately takes its origin from another family, the divine family, which is God himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: three distinct Persons, each of whom is the one divine Being. They are united in a bond of love we can scarcely imagine. On

this feast of the Holy Trinity, let us think of the three divine Persons. Those blessed with God's revelation in the Old Testament had not the slightest inkling that the one only God who had revealed himself had a Son who was also God. By hindsight the Christian can see that the Holy Spirit had given hints of it in passages of the Old Testament. For instance, in the account of the creation in the book of Genesis, God said, "Let us make man in our image and likeness." God the creator speaks of "us" making man in "our" likeness. In the first reading of today (Proverbs 8:22-31) there is given an account of God's Wisdom. No-one suspected that God's Wisdom and his Word was a second divine Person. At the beginning of the fourth Gospel, St John says that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Our Lady was the first believer of the New Testament to receive the revelation of the one God in three Persons. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you," the Angel said to her, "and the power of the most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God." The Child to be born was the Son of God. During the years when our Lord was

growing up, Mary his mother would have pondered on those words of the angel about her son. He, her son, was the Son of the Father almighty. He was man, and God. He was human and divine, an eternal divine Person who had taken on a human nature. When she and St Joseph found him in the temple, he said to her, "did you not realize that I was about my Father's business?" There never was a time when Jesus Christ was not aware that he was God's only Son.

When our Lord was baptised by John the Baptist in the river Jordan, the Father spoke from heaven. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Not long before his Passion, our Lord went up the mountain with Peter, James and John. There on the mount the Father said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him." But there is also a third divine Person, the Holy Spirit. We remember what the angel said to Mary at the Annunciation: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most High will overshadow you." At our Lord's baptism in the river Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove, and

with the Holy Spirit upon him, the Father announced that Jesus was his beloved Son. At the last Supper our Lord spoke of the Holy Spirit, and our Gospel today (John 16:12-15) provides us with one such passage. The Holy Spirit will glorify Christ, and instruct the Church and the Church's members on all that Jesus has said. On Pentecost Sunday, the Father and the Son together sent the Holy Spirit on the infant Church to launch it on its mission, with Christ invisibly at its head, working through its members. Not only must we believe that the one only God is three divine Persons, each of which is this one only God, but we must act on it. That is to say, this stupendous mystery was revealed to us because God wanted to tell us of his plan for us so that we might co-operate with His plan. His plan is to make us part of his own family life for ever, to draw us into the life of the Blessed Trinity for all eternity. This he did at our baptism and continued at our confirmation. We are adopted children of God, we share his divine life, and if we are in the state of grace, the Holy Trinity dwells within us. God's plan is that we be with him forever in heaven, provided we co-operate in his plan. That wonderful future starts now. But we must

live in the state of grace and grow in it. We must make the decision to love God with all our heart and live out that love by obeying his will each day. If ever we fail, we must repent, and start again.

Let us resolve to grow in grace by means of prayer and the frequent reception of the Sacraments, especially of the Eucharist and Penance. Today, the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, let us renew our faith in the Blessed Trinity. Let us live out our belief by a fervent Catholic life, a life renouncing sin, a life of prayer and the Sacraments, and so living as to merit heaven.



The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ

(The Second Sunday after Pentecost Sunday)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 81 (80):17 He fed them with the finest wheat and satisfied them with honey from the rock.

Collect O God, who in this wonderful Sacrament have left us a memorial of your Passion, grant us, we pray, so to revere the sacred mysteries of your Body and Blood that we may always experience in ourselves the fruits of your redemption. Who live and reign with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 109;
1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Luke 9:11-17

Jesus welcomed the crowds and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing. Late in the afternoon the Twelve came to him and said, Send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside and find food and lodging,

because we are in a remote place here. He replied, You give them something to eat. They answered, We have only five loaves of bread and two fish— unless we go and buy food for all this crowd. (About five thousand men were there.) But he said to his disciples, Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each. The disciples did so, and everybody sat down. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to set before the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. (Luke 9:11-17)

Eucharist We know from the Gospels that at least on two occasions our Lord fed a multitude of people with a handful of food. The food multiplied as it was being distributed, and at the end of the vast repast a lot was gathered up from the scraps. One occasion was Christ's feeding of four thousand (as reported in Mark 8: 1-9). With seven loaves and a few small fish Christ fed them all, and seven baskets full of what was left over were gathered up. Another was Luke's report of his feeding

five thousand. On this occasion five loaves and two fish were at hand, and twelve baskets were gathered up — one for each of the Twelve, obviously. Our Gospel passage today narrates this occasion. As it turned out, John had a lot to say about this event in his own Gospel. He situates it just before the feast of the Passover, and the day before our Lord's long discourse in the synagogue of Capernaum, when he publicly announced the doctrine of the Eucharist. The feeding of the five thousand is a sign of the heavenly Bread that is coming, that Bread which is Christ himself, especially as given to us in the Eucharist. So our Gospel today (Luke 9: 11-17), presented to us on the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, reminds us of the great mystery of our Faith, the most holy Eucharist. In the dramatic discourse at Capernaum, our Lord announces that the possession of eternal life depends on eating his flesh and drinking his blood. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will have no life in you"* (John 6:53). The people had no doubt as to what he meant: *"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"* (John 6:52). Our Lord could see that he was losing his audience because of his doctrine. Yet he is

uncompromisingly emphatic: “*My flesh is true ((alêthês) food and my blood is true (alêthês) drink*” (6:55). Nothing like this had ever been said before. At this, they said, “This is a hard saying, who could accept it?” (6:60). As a result, many of his disciples left him (6:66), and possibly it was this that led Judas to defect from our Lord in his heart (John 6: 70-71).

There were occasions when our Lord used metaphors and made it clear that he was using a metaphor. In Mark 8:15 our Lord warned his disciples against “*the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.*” They thought he was referring to real bread, and our Lord immediately expostulated with them: “*Why do you suppose it is (i.e., that I have said this) because you have no bread?*” Our Lord was referring to the doctrine and the example of the Pharisees and the Herodians. That is to say, our Lord immediately corrected their misunderstanding of his metaphor of the “leaven.” On the occasion of the death of Lazarus, our Lord told his disciples that Lazarus had fallen “asleep,” and so he would go to awake him (John 11: 11). The disciples

thought he meant that Lazarus was simply slumbering — and they could not understand why our Lord would want to go to Judaea, a place full of danger, just to awaken him from his repose. Our Lord *immediately corrected* their misunderstanding: “Jesus said plainly: ‘Lazarus is dead’.” (11:14). The point is that Christ corrected misunderstandings of any metaphor he used. When it came to the dramatic occasion of his announcement of the Eucharist, there was no misunderstanding. His disciples saw what he was saying, and they objected. They refused to accept his doctrine that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. Our Lord did not — as he did on other occasions — immediately correct their understanding of the meaning of his words. When he said that he flesh was true food and his blood true drink, he was using no metaphor. Our Lord did not even explain how he was going to do this. His body would be eaten and his blood would be drunk truly, but sacramentally — under the appearances of bread and wine. This would be shown and explained to his Apostles at the Last Supper. So it is that in a validly consecrated Eucharist, Christ is present whole and entire, body and blood, soul and divinity under the

appearances of bread and wine. The whole substance of the bread and wine is changed by the power of Christ into the whole substance of his body and blood, while retaining fully the appearances of the bread and wine.

By the power of Christ's word as uttered by the validly ordained priest, Jesus Christ is present whole and entire in the Eucharist. That presence of Jesus remains as long as what the Church calls the Eucharistic species persist. Thus the worship of the Sacrament of the Eucharist whether during Mass or outside of it, is the worship given to God alone. The holy Eucharist is kept outside of Mass in the Tabernacles of our Catholic churches, where the faithful may pray in the presence of the Eucharistic Jesus. The Church encourages the faithful to become profoundly Eucharistic in their devotion, making the Eucharistic Jesus the centre of their lives. St Paul writes that in Christ we receive every heavenly blessing. Let us then love the Eucharist and maintain in our lives the utmost reverence for this ineffable treasure.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1373-1381

(Christ's Real Presence)

Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Entrance Antiphon Ps 33 (32):11, 19 The designs of his Heart are from age to age, to rescue their souls from death, and to keep them alive in famine.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who glory in the Heart of your beloved Son and recall the wonders of his love for us, may be made worthy to receive an overflowing measure of grace from that fount of heavenly gifts. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, who in the Heart of your Son, wounded by our sins, bestow on us in mercy the boundless treasures of your love, grant, we pray, that, in

paying him the homage of our devotion, we may also offer worthy reparation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 34:11-16; Psalm 22;

 Romans 5:5-11; Luke 15:3-7

Then Jesus told them this parable: Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (Luke 15:3-7)

The Heart of God One of the greatest advances in religion was the Hebrew insistence that God is *but one*. There are no other gods

independent of the one God, and that one God is the Lord (Yahweh, Elohim). From this fundamental doctrine unfolded many others, such as God's infinity. The prophetic tradition, ordinary reflection and the assistance of philosophy all helped to bring out the lack of any limitation in the divine Being. The limited being of our experience ultimately requires and is dependent on Being without limit, pure Being, Being that is necessary which we call God. Now, not only is real *infinity* difficult for us to envisage – it comes down to denying limits rather than asserting positive features – but it is especially difficult for us to master the notion of a *Person* who in every respect is infinite. At first sight, the notion of a Person seems to involve definite states, attitudes and actions. A person loves, cares, and rejects. This in turn seems to involve the passing from what was not, to what now is – and therefore there are limitations. These problems of thought can be successfully tackled, but I doubt that the religions of man would have attained in a settled way to the worship of an infinite Being, were it not for a supernatural Revelation, and the divine assistance to appreciate its implications. Polytheism has been the normal religion of man and

would have held the field, had not a divine Revelation been given that gained the ascendancy. This Revelation told that God is one, that he is without limit, and that he loves – indeed, that he is *love*. What has helped man is the fact that God revealed himself in ways that can be received by the imagination. He spoke, and with words. Abraham in some way heard him: Leave your homeland and your father's house and go to a land I will show you! He did things: he sent Moses, and backed him up with miracles. These things were seen and could be remembered. The great God was obviously very much a Person. Gradually, it was becoming clear that the God of Israel was a Person who loved. Analogies were used, such as that he was a husband to his chosen people.

But the Revelation reached its greatest height with the appearance among men of Jesus of Nazareth. He came with the claim – only gradually expressed – that he, man though he is, is the Father's own divine Son. He is God with us, and the deepest and most obvious thing about Jesus Christ is that there was no limit to his love for his

heavenly Father and for each of us. There was nothing he was not prepared to do for our salvation, even to death on a cross. This love is the glory of God. Love is his glory. Inasmuch as the Cross was the greatest manifestation of the divine love, the Cross was Christ's greatest glory. He loved us to the end. In Jesus Christ, in his teaching, in his ministry, in his sufferings, his Passion and his Death, we see manifested the heart of God, and we are led to bear witness to its glory. So it is that we honour the sacred heart of Jesus Christ, and bow down in adoring wonder and affection for him who has so loved each of us. Christ loved me, St Paul writes, and gave himself up for me. Today is the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It follows on the celebration of the most holy Trinity, and the celebration of Corpus Christi, the most holy Eucharist. So let us think of the heart of Jesus Christ, which is the revelation of the heart of God. It is a heart filled with compassion and mercy. As we read in today's Gospel, it is a heart that goes after the stray sheep, and brings it back on his shoulders. He rejoices at having reclaimed the sinner, and heaven rejoices with him (Luke 15: 3-7). He earnestly desires that all come to him. *Jerusalem, Jerusalem!* he said,

gazing on the City. *How I would have wished to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks. Don't cry*, he said to the widow of Nain – and thereupon raised her son from death and returned him to her. *Ask, and you will receive*, he tells us. Christ's heart is a heart that is full of mercy, and his divine power shows itself precisely in mercy for those who are afflicted. God is a God rich in holy mercy, and his divine Son become man is the revelation of this mercy and compassion.

Let us cultivate a profound devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, so full of love and compassion. His is a heart brimming with mercy. He says to all of us, *Come to me, you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart* (Matthew 11: 29). Christ wants us to stay close to his heart, and to learn from it. He wants us to become more and more like him in heart – obedient to God and serving of our neighbour. Let us then resolve to do this, always remembering St Paul's words, *Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:5).

The Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary

(Saturday after the Second Sunday after Pentecost Sunday)

In 1942, Pope Pius XII consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. However, this is not a new devotion. In the seventeenth century, St John Eudes preached it, together with that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Church instituted this feast to encourage us to trust always in the intercession of our Blessed Mother as a source of grace and mercy. The all pure heart of Mary beckons us to be pure of heart, keeping it free from attachments so that it may respond easily to do God's will. She teaches us to love all in the Heart of Jesus.

Entrance Antiphon Ps 13 (12):6 My heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, who has been bountiful with me.

Collect O God, who prepared a fit dwelling place for the Holy Spirit in the Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, graciously grant that through her intercession we may be a worthy temple of your glory. Through

our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10; Psalm 34:8-13; Luke 2:41-51

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you. Why were you searching for me? he asked. Didn't you know I had to be in

my Father's house? But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. (Luke 2: 41-51)

Heart of Mary All recognize that there is much that man has in *common* with the animal – hence man is defined as a rational *animal*. But the average person does not think there is *no* difference between an animal and a human person – there are such radical differences in the powers of perception and choice between the two that practically no one would think of man as *just* an animal. Man can make true choices. He is not simply governed by his instincts. Man knows he should do what is right and avoid doing what is wrong, and he will be held responsible for his choices. No one regards the animal as *responsible* for his actions. It is widely and generally divined that man's power of perception is not merely a bundle of impressions caused in him from without. Nor are his deliberate choices merely impulses and movements caused by factors bearing on him. His

thinking and willing self cannot be identified simply with parts of his bodily constitution, be they the brain, heart or whatever. Thus his *soul* is thought to be *spiritual*. And yet there is a most wondrous union between the material body and the immaterial soul. For while the spiritual self (or soul) is indeed the acting subject, so too is the body part and parcel of the acting subject. The self does not merely *inhabit* the body, or merely *use* its parts as it might a material instrument. The arm is part of the person, as are the brain and the heart. So much is this so that we have expressions such as “he is a real *brain*” – and we have other expressions such as “he is soft-hearted” or “hard-hearted” or “a *heart* full of wisdom”. We do not mean that the heart precisely as a *physical* organ is actually full of wisdom. The heart in this context is a *symbol* of the perceiving, viewing and understanding Self. These expressions show that the spiritual and material dimensions of the human being have a special unity one with the other, such that the *material* element is even spoken of as the organ of a *spiritual* activity. Especially powerful in many languages, and notably so in Sacred Scripture, is the figurative meaning given to the “heart” of man

– and of God. The *heart* signifies the interior life of a person. We read that “You shall love Yahweh your God with all your *heart* ... these words I urge on you today be written on your *heart*” (Deut. 6: 4-6) – the heart stands for the will and the understanding. God promises that “Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it on their *hearts*” (Jeremiah 31:33).

God too has a heart, and this obviously is not meant in a physical sense. In the Old Testament we read: “Yahweh has searched out a man for himself after *his own heart*” (1 Samuel 6:14). In the Psalm it is stated, “Yahweh’s plans hold good for ever, the intentions of *his heart* from age to age” (33:11). In Jeremiah, God says, “That is why *my heart* sobs like a flute for Moab” (48:36). In the New Testament on various occasions Jesus speaks of his own heart, for example, “Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in *heart* and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt 11: 29). The heart of *man* is the core of his thinking and aspiring Self. Christ declares that “Happy are the pure in *heart*: they shall see

God” (Matthew 5:8) – so, by means of a pure *heart* we can *see*. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we read that “The desire for God is written in the human *heart*, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself.” As St. Augustine states in addressing God, “You have made us for yourself, and our *heart* is restless until it rests in you.” Well, let all this be the context of our contemplation of the heart of Mary, the mother of Christ – and our Gospel passage today shows Scripture referring to her heart. *But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart* (Luke 2: 50-51). It was in her heart that Mary treasured all the things she had seen and heard that related to her divine Son. She held on to them *there*, ever remembering them, ever pondering them. It was the core of her pure and holy self. What this means is that she embraced, held to and contemplated “all these things” with her entire self engaged. Nor was she doing this merely to understand. She wished to understand in order to serve God in total obedience, with her full self engaged in an entire submission. It

was an extension of the attitude expressed at the threshold of the Incarnation when the Angel Gabriel announced to her the plan of God. *Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your will.* She was the Lord's servant, and in her heart she treasured the words and actions of the Lord so as to conform to the divine will *totally*. In this way her heart was sinless.

When we speak of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (which we celebrate today), we think of a human heart that was immensely dynamic. It was not static, as it were. It was not a mere stainlessness from sin – imagined as a static object free of besmirching stains. It was, rather, a pure fire absolutely free of dross. Perhaps we could liken it more to the Burning Bush within which God chose to be present while speaking his word to Moses. The heart of Mary was alive with a holy power which embraced with pure love anything coming from the Lord God, and was united in love and attention with the heart of her divine Son. As God's limitless heart is filled with love and mercy, so Mary's limited yet extraordinarily great heart was filled with love and

mercy. This is a share in the love and mercy of her Son, whose perfect reflection she is in her heart. Let us ever contemplate the heart of Mary, for it is the most marvellous of God's creations.

The Baptism of the Lord

(First Sunday of Ordinary Time)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 3:16-17 After the Lord was baptized, the heavens were opened, and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and the voice of the Father thundered: This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who, when Christ had been baptized in the River Jordan and as the Holy Spirit descended upon him, solemnly declared him your beloved Son, grant that your children by adoption, reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, may always be well pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, whose Only Begotten Son has appeared in our very flesh, grant, we pray, that we may be inwardly transformed through him whom we recognize as outwardly like ourselves. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 42:1-4.6-7; Psalm 29:1-4, 9-10;

Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-16.21-22

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, I baptise you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased. (Luke 3:15-16.21-22)

Christ's Baptism The liturgical season of Christmas ends with the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord – or more accurately it begins the Ordinary Time of the Liturgical Year during which we contemplate our Lord's public ministry and teaching. We can tend, though, to celebrate our Lord's Baptism in a fairly routine way, and fail to see the biblical richness of this event. Let us remember what the baptism proclaimed and administered by John signified. John had been accepted as a prophet and his prophetic message was, Repent, for the Lord's Rule is coming. Prepare to receive the Messiah God is sending! His baptism was a ceremony in which the repentant sinner acknowledged before God and his appointed prophet that he was a sinner, and asked his pardon. The pouring of the water symbolized the forgiveness which the sinner trusted he was being granted. People from various groupings – tax collectors, soldiers, prostitutes and numerous others – came to hear the word of God, repent of their sins and receive John's baptism of water. Then, quietly and without any fanfare, from the midst of this throng of sinners stepped forward another to be baptized – one so astonishingly holy that the demonic world had already marked

him out with the utmost concern. Soon after, Satan would approach him formally in the wilderness to negotiate and to tempt. Here at John's baptism, Jesus acts as would any one of the great crowd of sinners. Regarding this procedure, perhaps something of a parallel might be one of great crusading evangelical sessions of Billy Graham. His rousing address culminates in an invitation to repent, to convert, to make a new beginning. Those who wish to do this are asked step forward, to come to the front and by this very action to declare publicly their intent to take the path of goodness of life and obedience to God's commands. There is a pause. Silence ensues, and one by one from various parts of the great theatre people rise and step forward. In doing this, they are acknowledging their sinfulness and their intention to begin a new path. Many come forward, and the numbers grow. They are all sinners, and they wish to do better. So too at John's baptism the crowds come – but here One comes forward who is the all-holy Son of God. There is no sin in him and no need to convert.

What is Jesus doing and saying? He is not saying that he is a sinner, for he is all-holy. He is not presenting himself as one asking God for pardon. We read in the Gospel that John himself was profoundly nonplussed at having Jesus stand before him for baptism. He hesitates in a way he never hesitated with anyone else. He himself, he said to Jesus, was the sinner, and if anything it is Jesus who ought be baptizing him. Our Lord did not deny it – but he insisted, saying that it was fitting before God that his baptism proceed. Our Lord was taking part with sinful humanity. He was identifying with every man and woman, even the least. It was a symbolic step that in effect linked the beginning of our Lord's work to its culmination both on the cross, and at the end of time at the Judgment. In the Gospel of St Matthew, our Lord tells his hearers that at the Judgment he will say to each: whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine you did to me. That is to say, our Lord at the end will proclaim his union with each and all of his brothers, including the least, and here at his baptism we have the first step in this public proclamation. At his baptism our Lord was acting as one with all his

sinful brothers, including the least. As their brother, their leader and their representative, he stepped forward for the baptism of John. Moreover, in going down into the water, he was prefiguring his descent into the waters of death at Calvary. Our Lord knew that his work, as the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, would be to bear the sins of his brothers and to expiate for them. As he would express it to his own disciples, it would be the great baptism of his life. Can you be baptized with the baptism with which I must be baptized? he asked James and John, when they petitioned for first places in his kingdom. I have a baptism, he said to them on another occasion, and how wrought I am till it is over! The baptism of Jesus Christ is an event in the Scriptures which is full of meaning, and we ought not let the few verses in which it is described be passed over without our relishing that meaning in our hearts.

And so it is that "as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well

pleased" (Luke 3:15-16.21-22). These words of God are plainly unique in the Scriptures and they reveal the uniqueness of the One to whom they refer. The holy Trinity bursts upon the scene of our redemption and Christ commences his redemptive ministry. He will bear on his shoulders the sins of mankind, expiate for them, and baptize his brothers with the Holy Spirit. The gates of heaven will be opened for all of us, and holiness will be gift of God.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.535-537
(The Baptism of Jesus)

A Second Reflection on the Gospel of today

The Coming of the Spirit Our Lord spent the first thirty years of his life in the obscurity of Nazareth. Almost 90% of his life was lived in Nazareth as an unknown carpenter with his foster-father, and Mary his mother. In the plan of God that stage would pass, for our Lord had a great and public ministry ahead of him, crowned with redemptive suffering, rejection and death. What a difference there was between

life at Nazareth, and his life thereafter! The turning point was his baptism in the river Jordan, which we contemplate today. He came quietly to John, asking to be baptised as if he were just another sinner, though being without sin. Baptised with water, as if repenting and being cleansed from sin, he was then baptised by his heavenly Father with a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came down upon Him (Luke 3:15-16, 21-22) to launch him on his public mission. Henceforth the Holy Spirit was working in him with a new power and effect. By the power of the Holy Spirit he cast out devils, cured the sick, forgave sinners, proclaimed and explained God's kingdom, instituted the Eucharist. By the power of the Holy Spirit he offered himself as a perfect victim on the cross. By the power of the Spirit he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven to rejoin his Father. The Holy Spirit had been at work in various great figures and prophets of the Old Testament, but in the case of our Lord, his action was without parallel in its saving effectiveness.

All this began in earnest at our Lord's baptism. No other person had been or would be such a saving instrument of the Holy Spirit as our Lord was from the moment of his baptism. His baptism signalled a new and unique entry of the Holy Spirit as a protagonist in the world. Then when this same Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son at Pentecost, this marked the sharing by the Church – the mystical body of Christ – in the evangelizing and sanctifying ministry of Christ. The Holy Spirit then became the Church's sanctifier and inspiration. Christ, the head, was now at work in his body, reaching out to all nations. And again, this was by the power of the Holy Spirit. At our Baptism, and again at our Confirmation, this same Holy Spirit enters into our own individual lives. He works with effect on our minds and hearts, and through our daily work and life he works on the lives of others. He enables each of us to become another Christ, and to be truly apostolic, drawing others to him. Let us resolve always to love the Holy Spirit, and resolve to live constantly by His guidance. For this reason the feast of the Baptism of Christ, marking the end of Christmastide and the beginning of the Ordinary Time of the Church's

Year, ought be a day of special celebration for each of us. Just as the Spirit came upon Jesus, so he has come upon each of us his members. Just as his coming launched Christ's public mission of bearing witness, so his coming to us has launched our mission of bearing witness to Jesus.

Let us rely on the Holy Spirit to help us fulfil this, our mission in life. Come, Holy Spirit! Fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love! Lord, send forth your Spirit!

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.535-537

(The Baptism of Jesus)



Monday of the First Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Samuel 1:1-8; Psalm 115; Mark 1:14-20

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come, he said. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news! As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men. At once they left their nets and followed

him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him. (Mark 1: 14-20)

God's Kingdom One of most central ideas of the Gospel is the idea of the Kingdom. It comes from the lips of our Lord himself, with its roots in the Old Testament. Christ commenced his preaching with the proclamation that the Kingdom of God was very imminent. Throughout his preaching, the Kingdom of God pervaded his speech. In our Gospel today, marking the beginning of the Ordinary Time of the Liturgical Year when we immerse ourselves in our Lord's public ministry and teaching, we think of him proceeding in earnest, now that John had been arrested. He "went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come, he said. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." The Kingdom had been at the forefront of the Angel Gabriel's message to Mary, the mother of Christ, before he was conceived. "The Lord God

will give to him the throne of his father David. He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1: 32-33). These words, recalling the great prophecies, would have filled the mind and heart of Mary as her child was growing up. In the Gospel of Matthew, the wise men had come from the East to honour "the King of the Jews." That this was a reference to the coming Messiah was evident to the chief priests and scribes of Jerusalem whom Herod consulted, because they were able to identify where he should be born. It was to Bethlehem that the Magi were directed to go (Matthew 2:2-6). Both Mary and Joseph knew that their child was the long predicted Messiah, the Ruler of the eternal Kingdom of God. I like to imagine them, in subdued and religious tones, quietly referring to it at night at the end of the working day. As the child became a youth, then a young man, then in his full maturity, and then at the threshold of the momentous work, the thought would have filled his mind and heart. His mission was to establish the grand and eternal Kingdom in which God would rule over all. All were called to be its citizens, and

he, Jesus, would be its Lord and King – the King of kings, and the Lord of lords, with all authority in heaven and on earth.

The idea of a “king” does not mean a great deal in the modern democratic world. It has lost its power as an image because the modern king, where present in the life of a nation, is largely an office of ceremony. The modern monarch may open parliament, sign certain documents and ceremoniously give his assent to legislation passed by the majority party in power. Were he to refuse to sign such a decree, he may have to abdicate. On April 5, 1990, the king of Belgium refused to sign a new law passed by the civilian parliament permitting abortion. It was one of the few functions of the monarch, and King Baudouin I refused to sign on grounds of personal conscience. So he was temporarily suspended as monarch, the law was promulgated by Cabinet, and the king was then re-instated by the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate in special session. The event illustrated the high moral character of that particular king, and also the merely ceremonial nature of his office. The notion of a king evokes indifference in the mind of

modern man. But this is a modern phenomenon, and if we are to appreciate the teaching of Sacred Scripture we must enter into the spirit of biblical times. The Messiah-King was a powerful image, and it had even been picked up beyond the chosen people – other nations had heard of a coming King, and the visit of the Magi is a dim reflection of this. The idea of a Kingdom, a Realm, could embody all the dreams of an individual and a people. The idea of the Kingdom of God did embody this, and it represented all that God promised to do for his people, and through them for the world. It would be the fulfilment of his promise to Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. And so it is that Christ announces the Kingdom. It is the fulfilment of all the prophecies. What was to become gradually revealed was that all the blessings of this Kingdom were to be found in the King himself. By knowing him and by living in communion with him, all the blessings of heaven would be received. As St Paul writes, in Christ is every heavenly blessing. Salvation consists in union with him.

Being a citizen of this eternal Kingdom means following the Person of Jesus through all of life. As our Lord says to Simon and Andrew, "Follow me, and I will make you into fishers of men" (Mark 1: 14-20). At the end of his earthly mission, he would tell these same disciples to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations. Those who believed would be saved. Those who wilfully refused would be condemned. Jesus Christ is the heart and soul of the Kingdom which he announces in our Gospel passage today. In today's Gospel the disciples who were called left all to follow him. Let that be the example we follow all our life.



Tuesday of the First Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 1:9-20; 1 Samuel 2:1,4-8; Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are- the

Holy One of God! Be quiet! said Jesus sternly. Come out of him! The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, What is this? A new teaching - and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him. News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. (Mark 1:21-28)

Full Authority One of the things that is taken for granted in any research into a great teacher – if the materials are available – is the *development* of that teacher's thought. Buddha *developed* in his insight into suffering and evil. He came to believe that enlightenment and the attainment of Nirvana was the answer. Mahomet developed in his understanding of what he considered to be his revelations. Aquinas developed in his thought, and there have been many studies of the development of the thought of John Henry Newman. Jesus Christ also developed in his humanity. We read in the Gospel of St Luke that the child Jesus "grew and became strong, being filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40). But one of the many notable

things about Jesus Christ is that, from his first appearance on the public scene, he is *filled* with the powers and authority that marked his Person. He knows who he is, he knows his divine mission, he knows his great powers, he knows what is to be revealed, and he knows his final end. He is absolutely assured in his confrontation with opposition – such as the opposition he encounters immediately from the demons. This seems to have been the first kind of resistance our Lord met with – it was that which was mounted against him by the satanic world. Then there followed the resistance of the religious leaders. Our Gospel scene today is drawn from St Mark, which many scholars regard as being that of Simon Peter. Christ has been baptized by John; his public mission has commenced; he has returned to Galilee and his preaching has begun; he has called the first of his apostles – Simon and Andrew, James and John; he has just taught in the synagogue of Capernaum. All are amazed at his doctrine and the authority with which he taught it. That is to say, at the outset of his public ministry, precisely as prophet Christ manifests supreme

authority. Let us linger a little on the demonic reaction to Christ's teaching in the synagogue of Capernaum.

The entire synagogue is in a state of wonderment and admiration for Jesus. They had not seen anything like his authority among the scribes. This spectacle of Christ's manifest authority seems to have been unbearable for an "unclean spirit" there in the synagogue. Christ has not sought the demon out, and without any provocation, it shouts out against Jesus. The anger and anguish of the demon seems to be spontaneous amid all the fascination with the Person of Jesus – so holy, so strong, so assured, so towering a person does he seem from the very outset. The devil, speaking as if part of a whole company, causes a further sensation. It demands that Jesus leave them alone. It throws an accusation at him of being vindictive, harsh, cruel, and all this without cause: "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" It childishly attempts to throw Jesus off balance by revealing to the assembly his secret: that he is the uniquely Holy One of the ages: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." It

is the bravado of one who knows it is all over, now that this Personage has appeared on the scene. The devils may even have guessed that this Messiah was much more than a mere man, and they are in confusion before him. Jesus immediately acts with sovereign ease. The demon is silenced by his mere word, and driven out. The devil, shouting in helpless anger – like one smashing the windows and slamming the door as he leaves – "shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek" (Mark 1: 21-28). The entire spectacle exuded power and authority. There was no struggle by Christ, no hesitation, no uncertainty as to his powers and knowledge. He was the Master and Lord of the situation and of all things pertaining to God. It was, we might say, all part of the opening shot and it sounded like a thunderclap. Things were to be different from that point on, and all could see it – even the devils. No-one then, nor at any point in the future, could dominate Jesus Christ. The climax of his domination occurred when he freely submitted to the Cross, and with that came the victory.

As we contemplate the beginning of our Lord's public ministry, let us marvel at his goodness and his greatness. He is great! He shall be great, the Angel had said to Mary when he asked her consent to God's plan. He is great! There is nothing better that we could possibly do than place ourselves by his side. He is the stronger man who has come to defeat the one in possession. Let us then be one with him and make his mission our own, and do so every day.

A Second Reflection (1 Samuel 1:9-20)

"..Hanna rose and took her stand before the Lord, while Eli the priest was sitting on his seat by the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. In the bitterness of her soul she prayed to the Lord with many tears and made a vow, saying, 'Lord of hosts! If you will take notice of the distress of your servant, and bear me in mind and not forget your servant and give her a man child, I will give him to the Lord'...." (1 Samuel 1: 9-20)

Hanna's prayer

Time and again people are in very desperate situations. No one seems to be able to help them, except God. We are surely reminded of the feelings of Hanna the mother of Samuel in the Old Testament. She desperately wanted a child. No one could help her, only God. But that help of God is what ultimately matters and it is available through prayer. When a person is desperate, that person ought pray, and pray repeatedly, never losing heart. The prayer will be answered unless he gives up on God, should God in his wisdom delay. He will know how best to answer the prayer, and what the answer should be. The answer may come unnoticed, and when looking back, it may surprise. Hanna's prayer was heard, and wonderfully.



Wednesday of the First Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20; Psalm 40:2 and 5,7-10;
Mark 1:29-39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother in law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them. That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick

and demon possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: Everyone is looking for you! Jesus replied, Let us go somewhere else- to the nearby villages- so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come. He travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. (Mark 1: 29-39)

Christ and Satan There is an intriguing and notable difference between the Gospels, considered as historical narratives, and other historical books in Sacred Scripture – such as the books of the Pentateuch, the books of Samuel and Kings, Maccabees, and others. I refer to the proliferation in the Gospels of the demons. There are no other books in all the inspired Scriptures in which the satanic world is

present to the degree that it is recorded in the Gospels. In the Old Testament, Satan appears at the beginning to enter into converse with the woman, and brings about her fall. Through her, he brings to grief the man. In the book of Job, Satan is allowed to test Job's fidelity to God. There are other references to Satan in the Old Testament, but they are relatively few. There are more references to the Angels. For instance, Raphael dominates the book of Tobit. But the situation is reversed in the Gospels. There are Angels who act in important ways, most especially in the infancy narratives. Angels minister to Christ in the wilderness after his encounter with Satan, following his baptism. Our Lord in his teaching refers to the Angels. An Angel assists him during his agony in the Garden. But there are many more texts involving Satan and the devils. Following his baptism by John, Jesus is openly approached by the Prince of Hell, appearing perhaps as an angel of light. It is interesting to see the calm converse between the two at the beginning of our Lord's public ministry and to compare it with the short shrift the demons get from Christ during his ministry. Our Lord allows Satan to approach him and to propose his

temptations. Satan conducts himself as if he looked on himself as an equal to the Man before him. It looks as if our Lord is allowing a new beginning. The scene is a kind of repeat of what happened at the dawn of human history when the Serpent approached the woman and entered into converse with her. This time, Satan learns that a new Adam is afoot. The first Adam had been made in the image of God. In a far higher sense the second Adam was, as St Paul writes, the image of the unseen God. The encounter reveals to Satan that this second Adam is not as was the first. Our Lord may have allowed this repulsive meeting to show to Satan that he now has a fight on his hands of the first order.

A fight it was. In the wilderness, Satan approached Jesus, and was sent packing. Once Jesus begins his public work, the demons vent their anger and disturb Christ's work. At each encounter, they too are sent packing. In Mark's narrative, our Gospel passage today (Mark 1: 29-39) follows our Lord's first address in the synagogue of Capernaum (1: 21-28). There had been two sensations in the synagogue on that occasion. The first was the amazing authority with which our Lord

taught. It was spellbinding, "for he sat there teaching them like one who had authority, not like the scribes." This "authority" was new. They had not seen its like before. The second sensation was the sudden intervention of a demon in the synagogue itself. The demon in question in some sense had possession of a man in the congregation, and it bawled out at our Lord in undoubted anguish, "Jesus of Nazareth, have you come to make an end of us?" Christ silenced him. Following this drama, we read in our Gospel passage for today that our Lord went to Simon and Andrew's house where he cured Simon's mother-in-law of her fever. We notice in this healing, incidentally, that sickness is not necessarily due to the demonic – though in many cases in the Gospels it is. That evening, with the Sabbath now over, we read that "the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases." Once again, the demons are present, and "he also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was." We observe the ease with which our Lord expelled them from the lives of those afflicted by them in any way, and how he

"would not let them speak." Christ's hand was supreme. The entire host of Satan could not withstand the word of Jesus. It was a harbinger of what was to come. Satan would engineer the hostility of our Lord's enemies and bring about, so he thought, the downfall of the Messiah. But all this was allowed by Christ in obedience to the will of the Father, and by his seeming downfall he gained the victory and entered his glory.

More than any other part of the Scriptures, the Gospels show forth the two great sides. On the one side there is Christ, and on the other there is Satan. In modern secular culture the devil is a joke. He is a mythical imp with a tail, horns and a pitchfork. How sadly blind we can be to the realities! Our Gospel passage today shows a proliferation of the demonic. The Satanic world touches our own and causes grave problems. But we have a Redeemer, one in whom we can place all our hopes. He is the stronger one. Let us then stand with him and take the fight to its end.

Thursday of the First Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 4:1-11; Psalm 44:10-11, 14-15, 24-25

Mark 1:40-45

A man with leprosy came to him and begged Jesus on his knees, If you are willing, you can make me clean. Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said. Be clean! Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: See that you don't tell this to

anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them. Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. (Mark 1:40-45)

Suffering In a sense, the leper's words to our Lord in today's Gospel are iconic of all religion: "If you are willing, you can make me clean." There are any number of theories, faith-based and secular-based, which purport to determine the origins of religion. But what is plain is that in religion man typically turns to the powers above for aid in gaining what he thinks he needs. Man is in a state of need, and he asks for help from the powers which, he believes, control the course of the world. So it is that he applies to the gods, and in particular to those whose powers extend to the area of need in question. Mars was the Roman god of war. It was not much use turning to Mars for matters concerned with love, fertility and beauty –

for those needs, one had to have recourse to, say, Venus. Julius Caesar chose Venus for his protectress. The long and the short of it was that religion was always seen as necessary to get the help man needed, but an associated question was, who among the gods was actually willing to help? Many of the gods were busy with their own interests and not very concerned with man. So our leper today expresses a fundamental statement when it comes to religion: "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Nothing else in the whole wide world offered any hope for the leper. No doctors could cure him. As a Jew he knew that the deities of the peoples were fantasies. There was no hope except in the one true God of Israel. The leper had a tremendous blessing before him. It was Jesus Christ in whom God was manifestly present and working, and his plea to Jesus expresses what we might call the weight of much of the religion of man. Our Lord's reply reveals the consolation of true religion, that all things are in the hands of one only God, and he is able and willing to help. "I am willing, he said. Be clean! Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured." This single scene validates the religion of petition. Man should strive to

know God and apply to him where he is to be found. Then he should ask for what he needs. Our Lord elsewhere in the Gospels urges us to ask and we shall receive, to seek and we shall find.

While our Lord revealed in his Person and ministry that God is both able and willing to answer man's needs – look at the spontaneity and immediacy with which our Lord, once asked, heals the leper – nevertheless it is not a simple matter. Religion, including the religion of petition, is not magic. It is not like pressing a button with the door immediately opening. It is not like knowing a special religious formula, applying it, and having the course of the world change accordingly. Man in his prayer before God is speaking to *God*, not to a Force that is vaguely subject to other forces, as were the gods of the peoples. God is the infinite Lord of the world and his love is all-seeing. He knows what is truly best, and, paradoxically, a request to take away a certain affliction may not really be for the best. But more to the point, Christ has by his life and death transformed the meaning and possibilities of suffering and death. It is now not wholly

negative. Let us make a comparison, beginning with our Gospel scene today. Compare the prayer of the leper to Christ with Christ's own prayer to his heavenly Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before the commencement of his Passion. The leper's prayer was, If you are willing (*thelōs*), you can take this affliction away from me. In Luke's account, Christ's prayer to his heavenly Father was, Father, if you are willing (*boulei* – "if you plan"), take this cup away from me – nevertheless, not what I want (*thelōma* – Luke 22:42) but what you want. The point is this. Our Lord immediately granted the leper his request because he was "willing". But it was "the will" of his heavenly Father that his divine Son suffer indescribably for the redemption of the world. Thus there is a certain sense in which, for a higher purpose, suffering can be allowed and even willed by God. He willed his Son to suffer, and the world was saved by that suffering. It was, though, a suffering that expressed obedience. Obedience was its form, its soul, its living centre. Suffering was the expression of obedience and became a blessing for the world as a result.

A priest arrives secretly in an anti-Christian country to minister to the underground Church, is captured and spends his entire life in a harsh concentration camp, finally dying in lonely obscurity. It has been his mission to suffer and die a forgotten martyr. His suffering was willed by God for a higher purpose. It was the seed of Christians. So it is with many disciples of Christ whose mission in life was to suffer in union with him. It was ordained that the Son of Man must suffer and so enter his glory. Because of Christ, suffering has become the royal road to victory and glory – provided it is borne with Christ in obedience to the will of God. Let us look on suffering – the fuel of true religion – with the eyes of Christ, and if it is God's will, let us suffer with him.



Friday of the First Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 8:4-7. 10-22; Psalm 89:16-17.18-19;
Mark 2:1-12

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they

made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralysed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Son, your sins are forgiven. Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone? Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins He said to the paralytic, I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home. He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, We have never seen anything like this! (Mark 2:1-12)

Christ and Us There are two features of creation which call for our contemplation, because they reveal the ways of God towards man. These ways of God are manifested also in our Gospel passage

today. The first fundamental fact is that everything comes from and is directly sustained in being by God. All that we are, all that we have, and everything that happens, is the direct result of the creative and sustaining hand of God. When a person sins, God does not cause the sin but he sustains in being the one who, by his own free decision, is sinning. This is one aspect of the profound odiousness of sin, that the all-holy God is brought so close to it. God cannot veil his face from what is so hateful to him because he holds in existence the one who does what is offensive to him. Precisely because he is constantly creating whatever exists apart from himself, God who is utterly other than all that is, is simultaneously intimately near to all that is. This imminence of God means that we may turn to him knowing that he is so very near, nearer to us in awareness than we are to ourselves. We depend on him directly and can speak to him directly because precisely as our Creator he is so immediate to us. That having been said, we observe another feature of creation. It is that God sustains and aids us through his creatures. We *generally* get our help from him *through our fellow creatures* – though all this too is the direct result of his creative

action. The child depends completely on God for every aspect of existence, but he also depends on his parents and on creation for his existence. His parents give him food, the planet gives him air, and his family gives him love. In fact, man's vocation is precisely to serve his fellow man and never to leave him – as it were – simply in the hands of his Creator. This law of service pervades the entire creation. The flower provides pollen, the bee collects for food, and then provides honey for man. Man spends his life and gains his livelihood by serving others. That is to say, all creatures depend on their fellows for their life and flourishing, while all the time depending directly on God for everything.

This general pattern is reflected in our Gospel today (Mark 2: 1-12). The crowd – with the exception of the hostile teachers of the law – look to Jesus directly for the answer to their needs. We read that "when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them." Moreover, a

paralytic who could not reach him was lowered before him. As we read, "Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralysed man was lying on." Our Lord proceeded to forgive his sins and to restore him to complete health. In Jesus Christ the people, including the helpless paralytic, had direct access to God, for Jesus is God. But notice this, that the paralytic was brought to Jesus *by his friends*. It was when Jesus saw their faith – the faith not only of the paralytic but of his friends – that he forgave the paralytic his sins. The paralytic depended not only on Christ, but on the physical help of his friends, and on their faith. All through his public ministry the incarnate Son of God generally brought the blessings of heaven to man through the help and agency of others. Our Lord gathered disciples in order to make of them fishers of men. He sent more of his disciples out two-by-two ahead of him to prepare his way. Even in the gathering of his disciples, our Lord depended on others. His first two disciples – Andrew and probably John – had been more or less sent to

him by their master, John the Baptist. Simon Peter came to Jesus, but it was through the word and encouragement of his brother Andrew. Likewise, Bartholomew came to Jesus, but it was through the word of Philip. At the end, just before he ascended into heaven, our Lord charged his disciples to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations. He would be with them. But he depended on them – just as he depends on us.

For our very creation we depend utterly on God, but for our creation we depended also on our parents. For our redemption and sanctification we depend utterly on Christ, but at the same time for our redemption and sanctification we depend on the ministry of his Church. All this is to say that God has made us his co-workers. We who are members of the Church are called to bring others into the presence of Jesus. Let us resolve to be like those people in the Gospel who brought their friend into the presence of Jesus. While people depend on God and on Jesus, they also depend on us, and we shall be

held to account for the responsibility Christ has given to us of bringing him to them by our prayers, our words and our deeds.



Saturday of the First Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 9: 1-4. 17-19; 10:1; Psalm 21:2 7;

Mark 2:13 17

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'? On hearing this, Jesus said to them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Mark 2:13-17)

Heroism When we think of the hero, we think of someone who had done a most notable good deed despite a great cost. A soldier has fallen, but is still alive and is under the line of fire. With bullets whizzing so close as almost to be felt, the priest crawls towards the stricken young man. He reaches him and gives him the last rites, and then begins to drag him towards shelter. The chaplain is hit and he

shudders. But he keeps struggling on, dragging his dying companion. The chaplain is hit again, this time more seriously. His companions are anxiously awaiting him some twenty yards off, praying he will make it. He struggles ahead, pulling himself and his moaning burden along. He is hit again. He dies a hero and is later awarded the highest honours posthumously. All recognize that he was a man of heroic virtue in a moment of mortal danger, for he was prepared to forego life itself for the sake of a true good. True, but our danger is that we can identify heroism with public and *observable* heroism. The chaplain could only have summoned the resources to do what he did if he had been faithful – heroic – in his unobserved everyday duties. Or again, we are in a notorious concentration camp during the Second World War. There has been an escape, and the camp officials have decreed that several of the prisoners are to be executed in reprisal and as a disincentive for any future attempts. One of those selected to die breaks down in loud tears, speaking of his wife and children whom he is leaving. Silently another man from the ranks of the prisoners steps forward and asks to take his place. His offer is accepted and he goes

on to die in the starvation bunker. He is the priest – and his name is Maximilian Kolbe, now a canonized saint. His act of heroism was but the culmination of a life of hidden fidelity – heroism, we might say – in everyday service of God. The essential point is our rising to the call of duty as conscience presents it. If we do this, duty will call us on and on, leading us to the heights. The hand of the Lord will be with us, but it all depends on our "yes!"

In one passage of the Gospel a very good young man comes eagerly to Jesus to ask him what he must do to gain entry into heaven. Our Lord replies that he must keep the Ten Commandments. He has always kept these, he responds – what more is needed? His good life was manifest, and our Lord looked on him with love. Imagine that! Our Lord looked on him with love! The young man was the object of our Lord's special friendship. If you want to be perfect, our Lord said, sell all, give to the poor, and follow me. It was a gentle call, full of marvellous promise, but the young man drew back. He could not bring himself to forego his wealth. He might have

become a saint, a great friend of God. But he failed to take this path of heroism. It all happened in a moment, and this bright moment was gone, gone forever. Our scene changes to the Gospel passage of today and our Lord has just finished speaking to a large crowd by the lake. He has noticed a tax collector, Levi by name, and as he walks along he pauses at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, is all he said, gazing at Levi. We must presume that Levi was also a man of some wealth because of his profession. We notice that in the same passage Levi held a banquet in *his home*, so the home was big enough to accommodate the function. He also had a lot of his colleagues there, which may indicate some position on his part among this class of persons. He had means, but we read that he "got up and followed him." He allowed nothing to hold him back from the call he had just received. Grace came to him and sustained his decision to have Christ for his life. There was another tax collector – and his name was Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in Jericho, and our Lord invited himself to dine at Zacchaeus's home. Zacchaeus rose immediately to the occasion, converted and became, we may presume, a

disciple of Christ. In each of these cases, the imminent possibility was that attachments to the goods of this life – such as material wealth – could have stymied the call of duty and of God. But the call was accepted.

Every day there are numerous calls of duty. We must refine and educate our consciences so as to hear the calls of duty aright. That said, the critical thing is to accept this call whatever be the cost. If in the little duties of everyday life, made manifest by the requirements of our state in life, we forego what we prefer, then we shall be led along the path of hidden heroism. Levi the son of Alphaeus took that step. He heard the call and immediately accepted it. That is what we should do – but not only in the big things that may be noticed. Our heroism, sustained by the grace of God, is to be the heroism of obedience to God in the little duties of everyday life.

A Second Reflection: (1 Samuel 9:1-4. 17-19;10:1).

Among the men of Benjamin there was a man named Kish... He had a son named Saul, a handsome man in the prime of life. Of all the Israelites there was no one more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders taller than the rest of the people..... When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord told him, "That is the man of whom I told you; he shall rule my people.' Samuel took a phial of oil and poured it on Saul's head; then he kissed him, saying, "Has not the Lord anointed you prince over his people Israel? You are the man who must rule the Lord's people, and who must save them from the power of the enemies surrounding them." (1 Samuel 9:1-4. 17-19;10:1).

Saul Each of us has real promise, springing from the calling from God inherent in our baptism. There are many figures in Scripture who showed real promise, a promise with its foundation in their calling from God. Consider the Old Testament figure of Saul, chosen by God to be king of his chosen people. Everything about him as described in our passage shows a man full of promise, one chosen by God and anointed to save his people from their enemies. He, the first king, could have

become a type of the future Messiah the eternal King, as his successor David would be. Saul had immense promise, but he failed miserably due to unrepented sin.

Each of us has great promise in the sight of God. Let us not fail because of unrepented sin. Let us fight sin daily, ever repenting and seeking the grace of God in the sacraments, always starting again. Now I begin!



Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65):4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 62:1 5; Psalm 95:1 3.7 10;
 1 Corinthians 12:4 11; John 2:1 11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, They have no more wine. Dear woman, why do you involve me? Jesus replied. My time has not yet come. His mother said to the servants,

Do whatever he tells you. Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, Fill the jars with water; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet. They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realise where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now. This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. (John 2: 1-11)

Jesus Christ One of the intriguing areas of modern study is the nature of religion. In *A Grammar of Assent* – a modern classic on the nature of religious assent (1870) – Newman chooses to define religion in this way: "By religion I mean the knowledge of God, of His Will, and

of our duties towards Him" (p.303, Image Book, 1955). The emphasis in this description is on the objective reality of God and his will for man. A religion without God would have been a nonsense for Newman. But the word "religion" in common parlance and in academic study now embraces a far broader range of meanings than that which Newman gives to the word. One prominent philosopher in a book on theism chooses to define religion as, in effect, man's commitment to ultimate values. We commonly refer even to sport as being a man's "religion." There are great religions which deny what Newman would have taken for granted as essential in any religion. For instance, it is generally agreed that Buddhism denies a loving Creator and a personal soul that persists in its full identity after death. It is clear that Asian civilization, including Buddhism, has traditionally manifested a religious instinct, but the formal beliefs of some Asian peoples have been very far from what a Christian – as in, say, Newman – would regard as an authentic religion. But then, for more than two centuries there has been debate among some about the essence of Christianity. A famous book entitled *The Essence of Christianity* by

Ludwig Feuerbach was published in 1841. In his book Feuerbach maintained that the deities of religion are projections of human needs. Man depends on nature, and he deifies certain forces of nature and makes of them the gods he worships and supplicates. Religion, he thought, is just a superstition, and should be replaced by science. Now, all of this shows the need for clarity in thought, and in particular thought about Revelation. What is the essence of the religion revealed by God to man – which is to say, the essence of the Christian religion? What is the Gospel, the Good News for all of humanity?

The essence of the religion which God has fully and definitively revealed is union with and faith in the Person and teaching of Jesus Christ. In our Gospel today (John 2: 1-11), our Lord did something which manifested his glory. At the wedding feast of Cana, he changed the water into a beautiful wine. The wine that came from the word of Christ replaced the water that was all that was left for the wedding, and it was the best wine possible. It was Christ's gift to man in his need. Let us take the wine that replaced the water as a parable, a sign,

of the uniqueness and the completeness of Jesus Christ as the heart and soul of man's true religion. Christ is the gift of God, and the Good News for humanity is the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, who died and who rose from the dead. At a certain point in history – in the time of King Herod and the Emperor Caesar Augustus – God fulfilled the promises that he made to Abraham and his descendants. He sent "his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4: 4-5). We celebrate his coming at Christmas. From the very beginning, the first disciples burned with the desire to proclaim Jesus Christ in order to lead all to faith in him. From the loving knowledge of Jesus Christ there naturally springs up in the heart of the believer the desire to bring to others the Person of Jesus Christ and the plan of God as present and revealed in him. That plan is to bring all humanity into communion with him. The fulness of religion and, in particular, the fulness of the Christian religion consists in the Person of Jesus Christ and union with him. Closely related to this fundamental truth is another. It is that

Christ is to be found in his body the Church which he founded on the Apostles, with Peter at their head. Christ is present among men still, glorious though unseen. His Church is the locale of his presence among men. The Church is his body, and we who make up the Church are his members. He reaches out to us in the Church's ministry, in her preaching, in her teaching and her catechesis, and in her sacraments, especially the sacrament of the holy Eucharist. He, Jesus Christ, is man's all.

In our Gospel passage today we read that "This was the first of his miraculous signs which Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him." Their faith in Jesus Christ in due course became their religion, and it was the religion they brought to the world. The purpose of life is to be a true and constant disciple of Jesus Christ. This is the pathway to holiness and to heaven. All of the Church's teaching has Jesus at its heart, and the whole of our life ought be a life in, and with, Jesus. This is the Good News that saves.

Further reading: The Catechism of the Catholic Church, no.422-429

(The Good News of Christ)

Monday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65):4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 15:16-23; Psalm 50:8-9, 16bc 17, 21, 23;

Mark 2:18-22

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, How is it that John's disciples and the disciples

of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not? Jesus answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast. No one sews a patch of cloth that has not shrunk on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins. (Mark 2:18-22)

It Is New! One of several key elements of the Jewish religion that gave it notoriety among the peoples was its observance of the Sabbath. It was a constant cause of conflict between our Lord and several of the religious leaders that he did not observe many of the practices of the Sabbath which their school stipulated. Thus he was attacked for healing on the Sabbath and for permitting his disciples to pick ears of corn on the Sabbath in order to satisfy their

hunger. Another notable feature of the Jewish religion (though not peculiar to it) was fasting. It was a mark of religious earnestness among the Jews that they fasted, and in fact the Jewish religion was somewhat notorious among the pagans for its practice of fasting. Some pagan writers even thought that the Jews fasted on the Sabbath, which they did not. Fasting is referred to repeatedly in the Old Testament – and in fact here our Lord informs his interlocutors that his own disciples "*will* fast." Our Gospel scene today opens with the inspired author setting the context, which is that "John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting." So it is that "some people came and asked Jesus, How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" It was plain to them that our Lord was a prophet, that he was filled with God and was a person of eminent holiness. But to all appearances he was not notable in his fasting practices – as was, say, John – and he did not impose a regime of fasting on his disciples in the way John and the Pharisees did theirs. Indeed, in another passage of the Gospels our Lord contrasts himself with John. John came neither eating nor drinking, whereas the Son of Man did come eating and

drinking. The leaders called John a man possessed, while him they called a drunkard and a glutton. So some of the people were puzzled; they could not understand what was going on; they could not fit it together. What did the religion of Jesus amount to? Our Lord calmly and sovereignly – and we may imagine, with a smile – explained to these children of Abraham that there was something altogether new here. It could not be business – the business of religion – as usual. A new start was being made, and later they would fast.

It was a new start indeed. "No-one sews a patch of cloth that has not shrunk on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no-one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins." Jesus was the new piece, the new garment of revealed religion which would clothe the peoples. He was the new wine from which all would be invited to drink. God had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob long before, and these patriarchs

had faithfully handed on the Revelation. He revealed himself to Moses and the prophets, and these had handed on the divine Revelation. The chosen people knew they were called to hear and to live by that word of the living God – the God who was the Bridegroom of the people. But in our passage today, our Lord calmly and almost casually indicates that the Bridegroom had now arrived. A new relationship with his people was about to be established, and the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham was about to be seen. "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not? Jesus answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast" (Mark 2: 18-22). At this point, with the Bridegroom now among them, it could not be business as usual in things religious. His disciples must come to know him, learn from him, base their lives on him. Revealed religion was a new thing – it was the love and worship and service of *him*. He was not just a master instructing his disciples, as were John and the leading Pharisees. *He* was the

object of their friendship, their worship and their service. He was the very Bridegroom. This had to be learned and *he* had to be placed at the heart of religion, and then, when the time came for him to be "taken away," they would fast.

That is to say, if we wish to be a disciple of Christ, first things must come first. St Paul would write that all the fasting in the world would be useless if it had not love. The first love in our life is our love for Christ. This is what must be learnt first and above all. Jesus Christ is the centre and focus of the Christian religion. He is not just our Teacher – though he is most certainly our Teacher. He is our Lord and our God. Our life is life in him, and his gift to us is a share in his own Spirit, enabling us to live consistently the life of God, if we but set our hearts and minds to it. Let us then place Jesus Christ at the centre of our lives, and never allow anything to take his place – and certainly never the very practices of religion.



Tuesday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65):4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 16:1 13; Psalm 89:20, 21 22, 27 28;
Mark 2:23 28

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some ears of corn. The Pharisees said to him, Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? He answered, Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar

the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions. Then he said to them, The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. (Mark 2:23-28)

Lord even of the Sabbath One of the most distinctive practices of the Jewish people was its observance of the Sabbath. Egypt had its many festivals, but not the regular Sabbath. The Sabbath was a linchpin of Israel's celebration of God as the Lord and Creator of the world – which is *his creation*. There is an inspired expression of this in the very first chapter of the Bible. In that inaugural text, the creation of the whole world is presented as a "work" distinctive of God alone – for the one God alone did all of this work. There were no other gods. The inspired author presents this pictorially as having been done over a working week, at the end of which God rests with his good work done. The Sabbath thus has its roots not only in explicit divine law (as in the Decalogue) but, obscurely, in the very ways of God. By working

and by then resting after the manner of the Sabbath, man is acting as God wishes him to act, and also, in some sense, as God himself acts. In this way man fulfils his own nature, for as the first chapter of Genesis shows, God made man in his own image. While he is subject to God, he is at the same time God-like, and is therefore called to act and work in imitation of God. The observance of the Sabbath was critical in the life of the nation as expressing its calling to act always in a way that pleases God. Thus it was that the Sabbath was one of the Ten Commandments. It came from God, and Moses and the prophets laid it down as fundamental – and this character it retains to the present day in the Jewish and Christian religions. To forget the Sabbath is to commence the crumbling of one's faith in revealed religion, and life in accord with it. I say all this simply to show that by observing the Sabbath, the chosen people of God in practical and ongoing effect recognized God as their Lord. But in our Gospel passage today, we have a remarkable statement uttered in the presence of the religious professionals of the nation – the Pharisees. Jesus declares, when challenged by them over the manner of Sabbath observance he allows

among his disciples, that he, the man Jesus whom they behold before them, is the very Lord of the Sabbath.

No other individual in the history of the nation made such a statement. Moses received the Ten Commandments of God with its solemn stipulation of the Sabbath. It is unthinkable that he would declare himself to be the Lord of the Sabbath. No prophet had made any such pretension. The prophets insisted on the observance of the Sabbath, and condemned its distortions. Some condemned its neglect while others condemned an observance of it that neglected justice and mercy. But they were all subjects and servants of the Sabbath – which meant that they were subjects and servants of Yahweh, the Lord of the Sabbath. In the encounter today, initiated by the Pharisees who saw Christ's disciples picking ears of corn, our Lord first of all shows his respect for the Scriptures and for the true tradition of the chosen people. "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which

is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions" (Mark 2:23-28). Our Lord is saying that the observance and teaching of the Pharisees in this matter was an innovation for the worse. Their received rules departed from the understanding of the holy men of old and from what the Scriptures plainly suggested. But then he calmly introduces a breathtaking addition. There is the hint of not just one, but two points in his statement. He is the *Lord* (*kurios*), and he is Lord even/also (*kai*) of the *Sabbath*. That is to say, our Lord seems to be making an assertion of his general lordship, while also applying it to the case at hand, his lordship even/also of the Sabbath. We observe here and elsewhere our Lord's assured sense of full sovereignty in all his teaching. One often notices that a dog barks because it is scared. Our Lord did not "bark" his personal claims out with aggression. They were uttered with a regal calmness, an imperturbable strength, as in our passage today. He, Jesus Christ, is Lord – Lord of lords and King of kings.

Let us apply our Lord's teaching to our own lives, and in particular to our observance of the Sabbath. Is Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath as we observe it? Do we make the Sunday the Lord's Day? Or do we take a very perfunctory attitude to Sunday, being content with a somewhat routine attendance at Sunday worship, and little else? Perhaps we live out the Sunday basically in much the same way as we do every other day of the week. Let us resolve to keep holy the Sabbath day, the day we rest in the Lord, worshipping him as a people and gathering our energies so as to serve him diligently by our daily work. It is thus that we shall please God.



Wednesday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65):4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 17:32-33, 37, 40-51; Psalm 144:1b, 2, 9-10;
Mark 3:1-6

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, Stand up in front of everyone. Then Jesus asked them, Which is lawful on the

Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill? But they remained silent. He looked round at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, Stretch out your hand. He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. (Mark 3:1-6)

Anger and Love I remember years ago I was beginning some research on the character of God as it is shown in certain religious traditions. In one of the first of my meetings with the moderator of my work, he referred to the Old and New Testaments. He said that the God of the Old Testament was a God of anger while the God of the New was a God of love. I immediately disputed his simplification – and indeed it was a very superficial categorization of the God of the Scriptures. But it is commonly held, and the anger of God in the Old Testament is regarded by some people as something of an embarrassment to revealed religion. God should not be portrayed as being angry and wrathful. There are anthropologists and theorists of

religion who set the wrathful Yahweh in the company of the other irascible deities of many pagan peoples, implying that he differs little from them. But Yahweh's wrath is not just a personal irascibility – it is a horror of sin. This is not the moment to compare the character of Yahweh God with that of other gods, but it is important to consider this common insistence that God can *only* be, we might say, "benevolent" – even with sin. This is relevant because, characteristically, a thoroughly secular outlook strives to be "benevolent" towards personal sin. That is to say, it looks kindly on it, and this is basically because it does not think that there is *sin*. What matters is that a person be sincere, and if you do what you do out of genuine conviction, then all is well. Thus there is nothing objectively "sinful" with homosexual practice in itself – provided you are sincere. So we ought have a "benevolent" view of activity that is "sin," if it is done with sincerity. We ought be even-handed, and if anything, it is sinful to be "wrathful" towards sin and the sinner. These secular assumptions are accepted as self-evident, and can set up in our minds severe expectations about the character and actions of God himself. It can confirm the rejection of certain revealed

doctrines, such as that of God's definitive judgment on each person, and of the doctrine of eternal punishment in Hell.

Now, God is indeed portrayed as being angry in the Old Testament. He punishes man for his sin. Adam and Eve disobeyed him and knowingly accepted the word of the Serpent. God cast them out of the Garden and imposed hard labour on the man and suffering on the woman. He punished Cain for his murder of Abel. Having ordered Noah into the Ark, he destroyed the peoples for their sins. He rained down fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. He punished Moses for his lack of faith by refusing him entry into the Promised Land. He took away the crown from Saul for his disobedience, and he punished David more than once for his sins. Because of their sins he allowed the city of Jerusalem to be destroyed by the Babylonians and the chosen people to be deported to Babylon. In all of this Yahweh God is portrayed as being angry – not just piqued and irritated like many of the gods of the peoples – and his anger is horror at sin. Yahweh God required holiness: be holy, he

ordered, for I the Lord am holy. In the Old Testament, God is portrayed as a God of compassion and love – he felt compassion for his people, and for this reason he sent Moses to deliver his people from their slavery. But sin provoked his wrath. So man has every reason to fear God if he sins. If he wishes to please God and obtain his favour, he must turn away from his sins. Thus our Lord began his public ministry calling on all to repent, for the kingdom of God was near at hand. Of course, we may philosophize on how the anger of God is best understood in view of the infinity of his love, but that God presents himself to us as angry if we persist in our sins and refuse to repent, is clear from his revelation. This brings us to our Gospel today, a passage in which our Lord himself is angry. He is the image of the unseen God, and we read that in the face of the sinful stubbornness of the leaders, "He looked round at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, Stretch out your hand" (Mark 3: 1-6). He looked on them "in anger." Let us make sure he does not look on us "in anger."

Jesus Christ, the son of the living God, has come to offer us his personal friendship. Salvation consists in faithful friendship with Jesus. We have a choice. Do we wish to live in his friendship, or do we wish to live without it? Sin is the one thing that destroys friendship with God and Christ – and unrepented sin confirms this loss. If we sin, we must repent so as to be received back into the friendship of God. Ultimately and eternally, we shall find ourselves in God's friendship or subject to his anger. What shall it be? His friendship? Well then, now I begin!



Thursday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: 1 Samuel 18:6-9; 19:1-7; Psalm 56:2-3, 9-13;
Mark 3:7-12

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the people from

crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, You are the Son of God. But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was. (Mark 3: 7-12)

The True Work If we let our minds range across the Scriptures and think of the prophets and holy men who preceded Christ, is there any prophet who – on the very face of it – appeared as being in his class? In this Gospel of St Mark another prophet is described – John the Baptist. Mark tells us that "there went out to him from all Judea and Jerusalem" people who were baptized by him in the Jordan. They came from Galilee too because our Lord, for one, came from Nazareth to be baptized by John, and we find Galileans among John's disciples – such as Andrew and John. But in the case of our Lord and his preaching, our passage today tells us that apart from the "large crowd from Galilee" that followed him, people also came from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. His fame went abroad, and once when he retreated to

neighbouring pagan territory we read that a Canaanite woman pursued him addressing him as the "Son of David." She would not leave off till she obtained the cure of her daughter. Granted the greatness of such prophets as Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, still, the Gospel texts suggest that the people were drawn to Jesus to a degree that was not matched by the prophets before him. The authority with which he spoke, and the constant power he wielded over nature and the underworld eclipsed the holy men before him. As Matthew reports (9:33), the people were amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." In the accounts of the prophets before Christ we do not read of the demons being flushed out in such numbers. Their presence was brought to light, and they could not restrain their fear and frustration before Christ. In the first chapter of Mark's Gospel our Lord taught and healed in the synagogue of Capernaum. It was too much for an unclean spirit that was also there – it bawled out at Jesus demanding that he leave them alone. They knew who he was, it said: the Holy One of God! In our Gospel passage today, whenever the evil spirits

saw him they fell down and cried out, "You are the Son of God!" But he imposed silence on them.

The entire scene bespeaks power, authority, stature and holiness. Jesus Christ towers above all. Yet he is humble and unassuming. Imposing limitations on the demons, he does not compel the recognition or allegiance of his fellow men. Let us notice his command to the demons: they were not to "tell who he was." Our Lord was well aware of the impression he was creating on the people, but he was also well aware of how ephemeral this impression was. He was a great light that had arisen in the land of darkness – as the prophet had put it – but his work required much more than impressions. The pressing danger was that the people would look on him merely as a great wonder-worker who could provide for their temporal and material needs. Our Lord's intention in healing the sick and casting out demons was to point to the greatest liberation yet to come and which he would soon effect. He had come to take away the sin of the world, to give men the gift of holiness and the power to be children of God. The

problem with many in the vast crowds seeking out our Lord, was that they desired not freedom from sin and the gift of sanctity, but benefits for this life alone. Our Lord could provide those things – he healed, cast out devils, raised the dead – but these miracles were a sign of something far greater that he wished to give. Some even wanted our Lord to be a political king who would bring them a regime of great material prosperity. They wanted a kingdom of this world filled with the benefits Jesus was providing in his miracles, whereas our Lord had come to establish the kingdom of heaven here on earth. The challenge before our Lord was to bring the children of Israel to desire this far greater benefit and to do the work that was required for it. That work was repentance: repent, for the kingdom of God is near at hand. It was also a work of faith: this is the work of God, that you believe in the One he has sent. A great change of mind was required of the people if the striking impression, which because of his person and ministry he was giving, was to have its intended effect. However great Jesus Christ was and is, man must be properly disposed to receive him.

In a word, we must approach Christ with the desire for God. Jesus it is who brings God to man. He it is who redeems man from the thralldom of sin and enables him to love God. Do we wish to be freed and cleansed from sin? Do we wish to be good? Do we wish to be holy? If we desire it, Christ will enable us to attain it with the gift of his grace, which comes with the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for these fundamental predispositions that make of us good soil for the seed of God, a seed that can, together with our work, produce in us a harvest.



Friday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65): 4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

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Scripture today: 1 Samuel 24:3-21; Psalm 57:2, 3-4, 6 and 11;
Mark 3:13-19

Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve- designating them apostles- that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James

son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder); Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. (Mark 3:13-19)

No One Is Left Out

One of the most fundamental features of creation is that there is a profound variation evident everywhere. There is small and large, high and low, powerful and weak, prominent and unnoticed. In the sea there is the whale and there is the micro-organism in a deep-sea sediment. On land there is the powerful bull-elephant and there is the tiny rodent. Among men there is Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte, while at the same time there are the many obscure urchins who have nowhere to lay their heads. In his Providence, God calls some to prominence in the full light of day, while others remain unnoticed in an impenetrable darkness of obscurity. Consider our Gospel scene today. Our Lord has begun his redemptive mission and has gathered about him his many disciples –

and it would become evident that his mission is to make of all the nations his disciples. Here, now, he calls from among his disciples a definite Twelve. He gave them a name which will be theirs forever. They were "apostles" – the word is Greek (*apostoloi*) and it meant "envoys," "ambassadors." They were called to be with him on a continual basis and to work with him in his mission. He would send them out as his envoys, and they would teach what he taught and drive out demons with his power. They would multiply his presence. At the heart of this call was his love for them, and their growing love for him. It was an immense dignity, to be his friends and collaborators. On his rising from the dead he would give to them a unique share in his own Holy Spirit. They were the object of his special love, and for all eternity they will have a unique status and dignity. On their part, this dignity was matched by worthy and holy lives, and the feast day of each is celebrated annually in the Church's Liturgical Year. The one tragic fall was that of Judas, who was soon replaced by Matthias. This all flowed from the special call of Jesus to

each Apostle – a call not granted to others. It was a mysterious call, and not to be explained by mere human reasoning.

Why did Christ choose some and not others? Consider even the Twelve. We notice that on various occasions our Lord selected certain ones and not others to enjoy a special association with him. John is called in the Gospel (of John) "the one Jesus loved." Peter, James and John are seen to be taken aside by our Lord for special time with him. For instance, our Lord took these three with him up the mountain to witness his Transfiguration. He took them with him into the house where he raised the little girl from death. He took them with him to be present during his Agony in the Garden. They are referred to by St Paul as the "pillars" of the Church when he met them in Jerusalem. So as Apostles, they had a special vocation that differed from other disciples. Within the Apostolic band they also had a special calling that differed, to a point, from the other Apostles. Why did Christ leave some out? Well, of course, if there are special works to be done in the saving plan of God, then some must be chosen to do them. This

necessarily means not choosing others. But there is this to be said. In a much more important sense, selecting some does *not* mean that others are "left out". The entire purpose of special callings such as those of the Apostles was in order to bring to all mankind the invitation to a personal friendship with Jesus. It is this which is the fundamental and saving vocation. It is this which is the primary dignity. The Apostle is called to be Christ's *friend* – Simon, do you love me? we remember Christ saying – but the most obscure disciple is also called to be Christ's friend. Indeed, the whole world has this calling, and the Church's mission is to bring this call to all and to make it fruitful. Thus it is that the most obscure of the baptized has the marvellous call to sanctity, just as real a call as that possessed by one of the Twelve. Indeed, such a person can attain a level of sanctity not reached by the one who has received the dignity of Apostle and Priest. St Joseph, husband of Mary, attained a degree of sanctity surpassing any priest or Apostle. This is because his intimacy with Jesus was second only to that of the Virgin Mary. No one is "left out." Each human being is the

object of the love of God and has received the call to love and serve him.

The fundamental thing about the Christian religion is the revelation of the love of God for all of mankind and for every single human being. Thus does everyone have an inalienable dignity which under pain of divine judgment must be recognized and respected by others. I am loved by God, each can and should say, and he, God, wants me to love him. As St Paul wrote, Christ loved me, and gave himself up for me. This is the foundation of the universal call to holiness and of the dignity of every man and woman on the face of the earth. No one at all

A Second Reflection: (Samuel 24: 3-21)

"David's men said to him, 'Today is the day of which the Lord said to you, "I will deliver your enemy into your power, do what you like with him."' David stood up and, unobserved, cut off the border of Saul's cloak. Afterwards David reproached himself for having cut off the

border of Saul's cloak. He said to his men, "The Lord preserve me from doing such a thing to my lord and raising my hand against him, for he is the anointed of the Lord." David gave his men strict instructions, forbidding them to attack Saul.' (Samuel 24: 3-21)

David David was one of the very greatest of the Old Testament figures, as a father and king of his people, and as a forerunner of his descendant the Messiah. His kingdom in some sense would never have an end. But let us ask, in what did his greatness consist? A central feature of the grandeur of David was his reverence and submission to God, which was manifested in his reverence and submission towards God's representatives, even if they were unworthy. David knew that when God had anointed an individual as prophet or king, to reverence that person and to submit to him in matters due to him was to reverence and to submit to God. A second feature of his greatness was his readiness to *repent*, and this we see in him both here and on other occasions. How different in this respect was David from so many other figures in the Scriptures!

In both these outstanding qualities we have a model. We ought have reverence towards those who represent Christ – particularly the chief pastor, his Vicar here on earth. If we fail in this (as did David here) we should repent.

Saturday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65):4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 1:1-4, 11-12, 19, 23-27; Psalm 80:2-3, 5-7;

Mark 3:20-21

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, He is out of his mind. (Mark 3: 20-21)

Christ at work There is a difficulty in the interpretation of this Gospel passage that is noted by many commentators. For one, it is not clear from the Greek whether it is Christ's "family" (Greek: *hoi par outou*) or his friends, or others who wanted to take charge of him. Nor is it clear whether, strictly speaking, it was he or the crowd that was said to be "mad" (or better, "beside himself" – *exeste*□). That is, it may have been the crowd that appeared to be "beside itself." Perhaps our Lord's friends/friends wanted to take charge – or manage – the crowd, for it – the crowd – seemed "beside itself" in pressing on our Lord from all directions for his help. The Greek is a little obscure in the matter of what certain words refer to, and so different translations are legitimate. So let us refrain from too much detail in interpreting the meaning of this brief passage. What is very clear is our Lord's entire

immersion in his mission. He had given himself over to the service of God's people. Now, let us remember that Jesus was not simply a profoundly religious and dedicated man – he was all of this, but immeasurably more. We are speaking of the Son of God. It is *God* who is given over to an unstinting service of his chosen people – the *great God*! In the Sistine Chapel in Rome there is a famous painting of God touching the hand of Adam and giving life to him. That touch can be seen as extended to all of creation. By the touch of God all things are sustained in being, and God transcends all else in his infinity. God transcends all, and does so ineffably. The thought of this, though, can leave an impression that God is far from man and creation, whereas he is indescribably near. But this nearness of God which is philosophically comprehensible is, as it were, outshone by further facts. The fact is that he became one of us. So extraordinary is this fact that, ever since the Incarnation, many have refused to accept that the man Jesus Christ is actually God. But further to this, the incarnate God became man's friend, and set out to serve man in a way that must

absolutely transform our impression of the one, only and infinite God. God is man's friend, and consumed with the desire to serve him.

Our Gospel passage today presents our Lord as utterly immersed in the service of needy man, so much so that, as we read, "he and his disciples were not even able to eat." Throughout the Gospels we see this unbounded zeal in Jesus. At the outset, Christ fasts for *forty days* in the wilderness. For all his penance, we do not read of John the Baptist performing this feat. John the Baptist awaited the people as they came to him, but Christ travelled wherever he could throughout the land of the chosen people of God. He went to towns, villages, farms. We can imagine people thronging to him from right, left and centre. At the same time we can imagine him visiting individual farms – and other homes. He invited himself into the home of Zacchaeus the chief tax collector. He dined in the homes of leading Pharisees, on their invitation. He made his way to the home of a centurion who had requested his presence. It was a ministry of consuming service, and whole nights were then spent in prayer to God his heavenly

Father. Christ was a man of work, and this means that God is a God of work. He works for our salvation. The intensity of his love and dedication, to which our brief passage today alludes, translates into a corresponding love and dedication to *us*. Each of *us* is loved by Jesus Christ as if there is no one else for him to love. Each of us who is baptized has been taken into a personal union with him and invited to live, by personal choice, a life consistent with that personal bond. The picture of Christ having no time to eat because of the needs of the crowds pressing around him, ought be for each of us a picture of his love for *us*. As St Paul wrote, Christ loved me and gave himself up for me. It also means that we are called to serve others in need. Let us note that not only Jesus had no time to eat. His disciples also had no time to eat. They were caught up in the life of service which marked the ministry of Jesus. So too with us. Every day we are called to spend ourselves in a Christ-like service of our brothers in need. When we do this, it is Christ who is loving and serving others through us.

There are two fundamental aspects of the life of the Christian, and indeed, of any human being: work and prayer. We are called to serve others every day by our work – and we have the picture of Christ at work in our Gospel passage today. Our work must be sanctified and made holy. This is done by doing it as well as we can for love of Christ and our fellow men. At the same time we must grow in our life of prayer. Christ spent himself for the salvation of souls by day, and much of the night he spent in prayer with his heavenly Father. Something of this must mark our lives too, according to our proper measure. Let us give ourselves over to it, then!



Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):1, 6 O sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth. In his presence are majesty and splendour, strength and honour in his holy place.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, direct our actions according to your good pleasure, that in the name of your beloved Son we may abound in good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19: 8-10, 15;
Corinthians 12:12-30 or 12:12-14, 27; Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly

account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. (Luke: 1:1-4; 4:14-21)

The Messiah There are certain features of the religion of Judaeo-Christian revelation which are common to many other religions. One

basic common element is, of course, belief in an unseen world which profoundly affects the visible world. In his religion, man attempts to be involved with the supernatural world and its higher powers so as to obtain aid in dealing with his various needs. The classic secular man denies that there is this supernatural realm. And there are many other things common to most religions. On the other hand, there are features of Judaeo-Christian religion which are especially notable, and perhaps unique to it. One is the expectation of God's coming Kingdom and its fulfilment. *Expectancy* pervaded the religion of Abraham, Moses and the prophets prior to Jesus Christ — and it passed over, in a new sense, into the Christian religion. It is a religion which *expects* that God will come and do things for man. He will save him from his difficulties. In the biblical account of the beginnings, God promises that there will be one who will crush the Serpent's head and thus undo his bad work. God promises that through Abraham all the nations will be blessed. He promises to David that his kingdom will never end. The promises continue and they increase with the prophets, and this glorious future which God continued to guarantee was focussed in an individual

anointed by God. Snapshots of him in the prophecies from one angle and then another flashed before the chosen people, but it was very difficult to achieve a united and common understanding. So, on the one hand there was the firm *expectation* that God would come to help and to save — and an iconic type of this was his saving of his people from their slavery in Egypt. A Messiah was coming — perhaps a new Moses, or a new Prophet, a new David. But his nature, his person, and his saving mission were contested. Very many thought he would save his people from political oppression. One could even describe Jesus Christ as being the definitive resolution of this confusion of interpretation. He came revealing himself as the divine fulfilment of all the longings and all the predictions.

In our Gospel today (Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21), our Lord has returned from his initial sojourn in Judea, during which he was baptized by John in the Jordan river, anointed by the Holy Spirit and launched on his messianic mission, and made contact with his first Apostles. He was now back in Galilee in the power of the Spirit. We read that “news

about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.” A new and great prophet had arisen, and John had pointed to him as the one to whom all should listen. And so he returned to the scene of his childhood, youth and manhood. All his human roots, the ties of human affections and his memories, were here. We read that in the synagogue “*he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.*” All of this, he then said, is being fulfilled here and now in my very person. I am the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah. Our Lord would go on in his ministry to show that all the prophecies had their fulfilment in him, but in a sense that too few had expected. He had come to save his people from their sins and to give to them a share in his own divine life. He was the God-given Saviour of the world in a

sense far greater than they had divined. Peter would proclaim before the Sanhedrin that “there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we can be saved” than that of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). Jesus is the Messiah awaited by Israel, sent into the world by the Father. He is crucified and risen, the Suffering Servant “who gives his life as a ransom for the many” (Matthew 20:28). It was a triumph and a fulfilment which few expected, but which in the event was shown to be the true meaning of the prophecies.

Jesus means “God is saving”. *Christ* means, “the anointed one”. Jesus Christ is the one God become man and anointed to save mankind from its worst and basic affliction, sin. This kind of salvation has little interest for many, and there were great numbers in our Lord’s time who had little interest in it too. They wanted salvation from sickness, hunger, political oppression — which were true and great evils, but they all stemmed from the basic evil which is sin. Sin entered the world through one man, and with sin came death. Christ is the Saviour of the world in that he took away the world’s sin — but this

blessing has to be brought to every person. It is in friendship with Jesus Christ that this salvation comes to us. Let us, then, be his true friends!

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 430-440

(Jesus Christ, the Anointed)



Monday of the Third Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):1, 6 O sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth. In his presence are majesty and splendour, strength and honour in his holy place.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, direct our actions according to your good pleasure, that in the name of your beloved Son we may abound in good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hebrews 9:15, 24-28; Psalm 98:1, 2-3ab, 3cd-4, 5-6;
Mark 3:22-30

The scribes who had come from Jerusalem said of Jesus, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “By the prince of demons he drives out demons.” Summoning them, he began to speak to them in parables, “How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that

house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand; that is the end of him. But no one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can plunder his house. Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin." For they had said, "He has an unclean spirit." (Mark 3:22-30)

Sin Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890) believed that a special problem for modern man in accepting Revelation was its doctrine of Hell. Accordingly, among his many projects he strove to explain it, show its reasonableness, and go as far as he could within the limits of dogma to mitigate its apparent cruel enormity. How could an all-good, all-wise and all-powerful God have such a system for eternity? We shall not follow Newman's attempts on this point here. St Ignatius Loyola presents Hell as one of the indicators of the terrible character of mortal sin, as is the very death of Christ who died to atone for all the

sins of the world. The point here, though, is that we do know that Hell exists and that many persons are there – the fallen angels are certainly there. For ever they are doomed to an existence of horrible, hate-filled and impossible misery. It is scarcely possible to imagine the hopelessness of this. We read in the Gospel of St John that after Judas Iscariot received from Christ the morsel, Satan entered him – and he went out into the night (John 13: 27-30). During his prayer to the Father (John 17) which followed this, Christ said that “none of them is lost except the son of perdition” – so possibly Judas is in Hell too. But what is at the root of this? What is the cause of Hell? If Hell is horrifying, its cause must be. The cause of Hell is unforgiven mortal sin, which is to say the mortal sin of one who refuses to seek forgiveness. There are two critical things here: deliberately engaging in some thought, word or deed which is a grave defiance of God’s command, and the subsequent refusal to seek God’s forgiveness and repent. The ultimate issue in human history and in the life of any individual is, then, the recognition of God’s authority and the rendering of obedience to him. Sin is the opposite of this, and all efforts are to be

made to avoid it. If a person deliberately sins, even if venially, who is to say that he will have it in him to repent of this? He depends, as in everything, on the help of God. If a person proceeds to sin gravely, how can he be confident that he will repent and truly seek the forgiveness of God? Every person's ambition ought be to avoid deliberate venial sin, and if venial sin is committed then to turn to God in repentance immediately. For let it be remembered that the end of sin, in itself, is separation from God.

All of this brings us to the startling statement by Jesus Christ that there is a sin that will never be forgiven. *“Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin”* (Mark 3: 29). Our Lord was warning the scribes from Jerusalem of this – he does not say that they were actually in this state of sin, but they must have been in danger of it or Christ would not have told them this. They had said of him that he had an unclean spirit. Regarding this kind of sin, our Lord does not

provide us with a detailed explanation of the nature and circumstances of it. In this particular instance it had to do with what they were saying about him, but presumably it also had to do with the *attitude they had* towards the sinful falsity they were uttering. What they said was gravely sinful, and in their heart of hearts they must have known it. They knew that our Lord was good – he once challenged them to convict him of sin. They did not, and could not. They accused him of violating their own interpretations and prescriptions concerning the Sabbath, but they were unable to answer his rebuttal of their accusations. When our Lord affirmed that he was the Messiah and Son of the Living God at his trial, he was accused of blasphemy – but they did not *prove* that he had blasphemed. His miracles and goodness of life supported his claims. Again, this is not to say that they were guilty of the “everlasting sin” our Lord refers to, but they may have been on the *way* to it. St Peter stated in his sermon after healing the cripple that the religious leaders acted in ignorance in putting Christ to death (Acts 3: 17) – but this ignorance was clearly culpable and the blindness it involved was a result of sin. So what are we to say of this sin? The

explanations given of it are numerous, but inasmuch as serious sin involves the deliberate flouting of a gravely binding command of God, one presumes that the impossibility of obtaining forgiveness involves the knowing rejection of God's goodness and his authority thus to bind. It also ultimately rejects the call to seek pardon. It is a deliberate choice that acts against the known light, and wishes for final independence and for being greater than God. Horrible as it is, it is evident that this is possible for a free creature.

But let us bring this down to each of us and to our daily life. It is *sin* which is the constant enemy, and our Lord's warning of the *everlasting sin* shows how bad sin can become. The first thing which our Lord did for his disciples in the Upper Room on his rising from the dead was to breathe on them the Holy Spirit – and then he gave them the power to forgive sins. He was the Lamb of God who by his Death and Resurrection had taken away, in principle, the sin of the world. This grand benefit had now to be brought to each individual through the ministry of his Church. Sin must be avoided, and God must

be obeyed – for love of him. Any deliberate sin, no matter how venial, is a step along the road of sin which is the ultimate evil. Let Christ's warning to the scribes inspire us to live a holy life in union with him and by the aid of his grace.



Tuesday of the Third Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):1, 6 O sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth. In his presence are majesty and splendour, strength and honour in his holy place.

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Scripture today: 2 Samuel 6:12-15.17 19; Psalm 23; Mark 3:31-35

"The mother and brothers of Jesus arrived and, standing outside, sent in a message asking for him. A crowd was sitting round him at the time the message was passed to him. 'Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside asking for you.' He replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking round at those sitting in a circle about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the

will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3: 31-35)

Obedience There are numerous things we take for granted, day by day. We take for granted the air we breathe, the shelter we have, the work that is ours and the health we might enjoy. We take for granted the family into which we were born and the nation of which we are citizens. If for any reason we are suddenly deprived of these blessings, it is then that we understand how much we depend on them. A catastrophe occurs and one's family is lost — how forlorn does life suddenly become and what a struggle lies ahead! Or again, we are made redundant and our job is lost. The mortgage cannot be met and in due course the home is lost. To that point we had taken so much for granted. There is a blessing, a feature of life that is almost like the air we breathe and which we also tend to take for granted. I refer to the entire social dimension of life. We are profoundly dependent on relationships with others. We are not made to be alone. We are so constituted that if we are to flourish at all, then in some sense we must

be in relationship with others — or at least another. This is so evident that it barely merits observation, except that its implications are very often not realized. In actual fact, the entire universe is essentially relational. Virtually nothing stands alone, down to the tiniest neutron. Inanimate things depend on other things, as does the vast realm of living things — right up to the family of man. All things are enmeshed in a network of relationships which give to them their true dynamism and life. If a human being is completely isolated, it is certain that, like other things in the world, he will crumble to pieces. In all of this, the world bears the imprint of the Creator himself. While God is one infinite being, he is not solitary. He is three divine Persons in an ineffable mutual relationship. Now, while the universe is a heaving, throbbing network of mutual relationships, what especially distinguishes man is that the soul of all his relationships is his *bond with God*. He is called to be profoundly related to God his Creator. That is, he is a *religious* being.

Man instinctively knows this. He takes to being religious, unless his culture or his own deliberate neglect smothers this natural propensity. As God's creature, he has been so constituted as to tend to want to be in some relationship to God. The challenge is to make of this the foundation of his life. That is to say, it is not enough that he acknowledge the existence of God and turn to him often enough, especially when in difficulty. Essentially, he must accept God's authority and respond to it with obedience. This is the perennial challenge for religious man. It is no great thing to be religious — it is natural to man for he is God's creature, even though modern secular man characteristically suffers from the aberration of lacking religion. What man is called to do is not just to be in some conscious relationship with God, but to be in a relationship distinguished by continual obedience. If he fails in obedience, he must recognize this, repent of it, and get back on course. All of this arises from the fact that he is God's creature. But a new situation has come into being by the direct intervention of God. It is that God has become man and has inaugurated a new family around him. We are now called to a

wondrously new relationship with him. We are to be brothers and sisters of the Incarnate God himself. God is now not only my Creator, but he is my Brother. This is one of the most obvious differences between Christianity and, say, Islam. Jesus, my God, is my Brother because of the Incarnation and because of the Atonement. He took to himself our human nature and he redeemed us from our sin. We are his brothers and sisters, as he says in our Gospel passage today. *"Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking round at those sitting in a circle about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers.'"* Let us not take this new relationship for granted. God has made himself our kinsman. But the same challenge lies ahead. We must accept God's authority and respond in obedience. *"Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother"* (Mark 3:31-35).

Life is meant to flourish, and we all feel sad when life fails. The life of man depends especially on a flourishing relationship with God his Creator. For man this means a life of obedience to him,

and more precisely, a loving obedience. This is not just something we must search for according to our best lights. It is something which God has revealed and instituted in an extraordinary fashion. God has become man to make of us his brothers and sisters. The invitation stands, and the deepest human tragedy consists in the invitation not being accepted. But once accepted, we must then do what Christ our Brother did. We must do the will of God. Therein lies true life.



Wednesday of the Third Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):1, 6 O sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth. In his presence are majesty and splendour, strength and honour in his holy place.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, direct our actions according to your good pleasure, that in the name of your beloved Son we may abound in good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 7:4-17; Psalm 89:4-5, 27-30; Mark 4:1-20

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered round him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some

fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times. Then Jesus said, He who has ears to hear, let him hear. When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!' Then Jesus said to them, Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root,

they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop- thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown. (Mark 4:1-20)

Hearing the Word

One of the truly great contributions to civilization made by Christianity is its insistence on the inalienable dignity of each person. Especially among some secular humanists there is a denial of the validity of the *concept* of dignity. For instance, the philosopher John Aldergrove has written that dignity, regardless of its meaning, cannot justify the claims that are attached to it — such claims are precluded by the observations of David Hume. Now, it may be that philosophical work on the foundations of human dignity still needs to be done in order to answer the objections of those who deny it. Nevertheless, under pressure from the *religions* of man and in

particular from Christianity, in fact the dignity of each person has come to be recognized by the world. Yet it is a truth that is easy to forget because the individual can be quickly lost, forgotten and swept away in the ebb and flow of the tides of history. A person rises suddenly from his obscurity and gradually captures the organs of power - Bonaparte, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao. There is set in motion a pattern of war and seizure. Armies march and clash, thousands — perhaps millions — are lost from this life. What is to be said of all the ordinary persons thus sent spinning down the drain of death and obscurity? They have been used and forgotten. Alternatively, consider the countless persons who have spent their lives in the search for pleasure and immediate satisfaction. Perhaps it has been, not instant pleasure, but power or possessions they have sought. Still, their brief spans have been without consequence. They have forgotten their own dignity and have built nothing upon it. Lives without number have been like the seed that is scattered here and there and has come to nothing. We may say that much of human history is evoked by our Lord's parable in our Gospel passage today. *"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was*

scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow."

The fact is that often there is not a lot that an individual can do to radically change the circumstances of his life. Granted many exceptions, generally if a person is born poor he will not end his life immersed in riches. The effect of circumstances is considerable — so much so that there have been many who have seen the human being as simply the product of his circumstances. He begins his adulthood with what he takes to be a happy marriage, but ten years later all has broken down and prudent observers cannot say it has been his own fault. He had bad luck in the *circumstances* of his marriage. Again, he is a well-qualified man and yet due to circumstances he has lost his job and it is very difficult for him to find work again. His entire life is affected by the circumstance that he has little money. Or again, he has, despite his best efforts, two or three extremely difficult children. It virtually breaks his heart. There are so many things in life that can thwart and

stultify the flourishing of man's dignity and potential. Circumstances can, over time, profoundly affect the character of a *society*. The question is, is there any way the dignity of a person can flourish, whatever be the circumstances that come his or her way? Let us put it in the context of our Gospel passage today (Mark 4: 1-20). How can a person yield a harvest in his life, even if his circumstances be hopeless in their natural potential? Our Lord gives the answer. If we receive the word of God and resolutely put it into practice, receiving and accepting it with a good heart, that word will yield the *harvest* that God our creator wants. And so it is, for example, that the person who remains in an iron lung all her life can pass from this life with dignity unimpaired and wonderfully enhanced. She has striven to live in gratitude and every day has kept close to Christ her Saviour. Or consider the wife with an impossible husband. Say by day she lives in union with Christ. She is unfailingly patient and kind with her husband, and wins out in the end by drawing him back into the practice of religion. She has not been the product of her circumstances because she has been good soil for the word of God.

If we wish our lives to be a success no matter what the circumstances might be, then we have before us the key to it. The key lies in our attitude to Christ and his word. The most important "circumstance" in life is that we make the decision to be a disciple of Christ and to receive his word in faith and obedience. That word comes to us in the teaching of the Church and in reading the Church's Book, which is the inspired Scriptures. Let us be like the good soil in our Lord's parable, receiving the word of Christ with joy and faith, and putting it generously into practice.



Thursday of the Third Week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: 2 Samuel 7:18-19, 24-29; Psalm 132:1-2, 3-5, 11 14;

Mark 4:21 25

Jesus said to them, Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. Consider carefully what you hear, he continued. With the

measure you use, it will be measured to you- and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. (Mark 4:21-25)

Becoming Rich The visible world is the source of unending fascination. Inanimate matter is teeming with unsolved mysteries, and the mystery deepens as we pass to the contemplation of living things. Let us divide life into two broad groups: life that has the power of awareness, and life that does not. An ant has awareness. A mighty oak tree does not. For all its luxurious growth, the oak will never attain to the slightest awareness. The ant has the power of awareness from the instant of its appearance. But if we compare the awareness of a gifted sheep dog with the awareness of a ten-year old child, there is a critical difference between the two. The child has *self*-awareness, while the sheep dog does not. There are numerous other differences between human awareness and animal awareness too, of course. The human being is aware of abstractions and categories: he is aware that he is, for instance, "a human being." The animal is not aware of such

abstractions. It has no idea that it is, say, "a tiger" — even though it feels at home with tigers, as the case may be. Very importantly, the human being is aware of objective *duty*. For instance, he knows he should not murder. The animal has no such awareness. It would be absurd to speak of an animal "murdering" another. The animal is driven by instinct. I make these brief observations to introduce another distinctive feature of the human being. I refer to the power of the human being freely to perfect himself. It would be ridiculous to expect an animal to set out to perfect itself, to enrich itself by deliberately cultivating its powers, indeed to set its goals for a flourishing life. It acts by instinct and its development is instinctive. It cannot get beyond where its instincts take it, however impressive those instincts may be. The human being can set his goals for an enriched life, and he is even morally obliged to do this. He is obliged not to squander his capacity for self-improvement, but to seek what is truly best for himself. He has a duty not to impoverish himself by neglect, but to become genuinely rich.

The question is, what does this really mean? What does it mean to enrich oneself? Many think that it means becoming rich in *material goods*. If a person acts on this and makes this the dominant goal of his life, then the danger is that he will be impoverished — through neglect — in more important riches. He may find himself with scarcely any true friends, even within his own family life. Another person may silently have formed the notion that he will be most fulfilled if he gains most *power*. So he sets out to attain that goal and he may or may not achieve it, depending on his abilities. But in the process he may find himself bereft of other riches. He may have virtually no religion in his life, through neglect. God is distant from him. So the seeking of riches — or, to put it better, enrichment and perfection — is a good thing and is a moral obligation. But part and parcel of the fulfilment of this obligation is the duty to determine correctly what is true enrichment in life. For this we need not only a prudent personal judgment, but the guidance of God himself. We need this divine guidance because our own minds — as is evident from ordinary experience — are clouded and influenced by sin. We tend to think that self-gratification, personal

power, and other egocentric goals are the way to true wealth in life. We need the guidance of God and his grace to follow this guidance. But the ultimate goal remains the same: personal perfection and the flourishing of our best potential. We just need to know clearly in what this really consists, how to get there, and whatever help we need to attain it. All of this brings us to our Gospel today. *"Consider carefully what you hear, he continued. With the measure you use, it will be measured to you- and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him"* (Mark 4: 21-25). Whoever has, will be given more, our Lord says. What is it that we must have? We must have the love of God in our hearts. That is what true wealth consists in. If we have that, we shall be truly rich. All other things we seek and attain in life ought serve to enrich ourselves in the love of God. With this we are rich indeed.

We ought aim to become rich in life. By the time our last breath arrives, we ought be wealthy. But it has to be wealth that we

can take with us, wealth that is not subject to destruction. The wealth that God wants us to have is faith, hope and love for him. At great cost to himself God made available to us real wealth, not the wealth that is a mere illusion. The one thing necessary is the love and friendship of Christ. It is in him that we are to seek and use the other things of life, which all too many consider to be the only true wealth. Let us then seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these other things will be given us, in the measure that God sees fit.

A Second Reflection: (Mark 4: 21-25).

Consider Carefully What we take notice of in life depends largely on what our interest is. If we are interested, we will take notice of what we are seeing and hearing. And there is much in life that we see and hear which we take little notice of. If we take little notice of something, we will scarcely remember much of it, nor will it play much part in our life. Our having seen or heard will bring little profit. Our Lord said that, in respect to his word, we must *take notice*. We can know his word by means of the inspired Scriptures and the teaching and

preaching of the Church, but do we take notice? In our Gospel today, our Lord says this: "*Take notice of what you are hearing... for the man who has will be given more; from the man who has not, even what he has will be taken away...*" (Mark 4:24-25) On another occasion our Lord told the parable of the sower going out to sow. The seed that fell on the good soil is the man who hears the word of God and accepts it (Mark 4: 20). But to accept it, one must take notice of it. If we are to take notice of it, we must be genuinely interested, committed to God and his word.

That is to say, we must be good soil. We must be *disposed* to take notice. It is this soil that, with the seed having fallen, produces the harvest. This is a crucial matter because our Lord says that "*the man who has will be given more; from the man who has not, even what he has will be taken away.*"



Friday of the Third Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):1, 6 O sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth. In his presence are majesty and splendour, strength and honour in his holy place.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, direct our actions according to your good pleasure, that in the name of your beloved Son we may abound in good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 11:1 4a, 5 10a, 13 17; Psalm 51:3 7, 10-11;
Mark 4:26 34

Jesus also said, This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces corn- first the stalk, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it,

because the harvest has come. Again he said, What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade. With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything. (Mark 4: 26-34)

True Hope One might say that the story of each human life and, indeed, of all human history, is the story of hope. How sad, unusual and even unnatural it is to come across a person who has no hope. The normal thing is that a young person grows with hope as he thinks of his future and what he might do with his life. Hope drives his efforts at study, sport, friendships and other spheres of his activity as he looks forward to a career, a future family and a life of doing worthwhile things. Countless millions have *some* hope in their hearts, and even in

the midst of poverty and suffering they hope to improve their lot. Hope is a natural gift and it is the engine of great things in the life of both the individual and the world. But what happens? The likelihood is that hopes will experience disappointment. A person will have to adjust his hopes to the limits and realities of what he manages to achieve. Importantly, there is the danger that, due to disappointment and many failures, hope can weaken and even become minimal. Thus there are many who reach something of a plateau in life, and beyond that they hope for little. So they "retire." There is hope there, but they do not *hope* for very much, and so they do not *do* very much. Life becomes very ordinary in the sense that it lacks dynamism and striving. It ceases to be a life of real work. It ceases to be a life of joy. The core of the problem would seem to be that no reason is seen to hope, that life appears as a great brute fact that must be accepted, offering little reason for high hopes. The person is now "over the hill." His dreams have gone because of the hard surface of reality. Inasmuch as hopes and dreams are quite evidently central to a fulfilled life, how can a person maintain his hopes undimmed to the

end? Instead of passing from this life with his hopes worn down to the barest flicker, how can he reach his end with his hopes higher than ever? I think that this is a very fundamental issue for happiness, goodness, joy and fulfilment in life.

To begin with, if in reality our hopes are dependent entirely on ourselves, ordinary human reflection will suggest that they rest on a very insecure foundation. Goals that are chosen on the simple basis of personal preference or personal ability are tenuous because, obviously, there are so many factors beyond this basis that will affect the goals in question. Napoleon Bonaparte chose his goals — to be master of Europe — on the basis of preference and ability, but there were many other factors which resulted in these goals being denied him. If hope is to remain undimmed and indeed grow, then while to an extent it must depend on ourselves and on what we choose to do, it cannot depend entirely on ourselves. What, then, is the ultimate basis of true and enduring hope? It has to be God and his holy will. All things depend on God. He is ever active in sustaining the world and bringing to

fruition his Plan. The inspired Scriptures show us that God has a Kingdom that he is developing, and that Christ has established this Kingdom or Rule here on earth. Jesus himself is the heart of the Kingdom of God, and we enter that Kingdom and become its citizens by entering into union with the Person of Jesus, whose body is the Church he founded on Simon Peter. This glorious Kingdom is growing, due to the power of God. This brings us to our Gospel passage today (Mark 4: 26-34), in which our Lord describes what the Kingdom of God is like. *"It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."* Our best hopes ought be in God, who will assuredly attain his goals. Our goal ought be to devote our lives and energies to playing a modest, though whole-hearted part in God's work. The ultimate basis of true hope is God and what he is doing. Thus, even apparent failure will not diminish our hopes. In the midst of the many failures in life, our hope will remain undimmed right to the end, for it is based on God and his almighty will.

The Christian contemplates Jesus his divine Master — who hangs from the Cross. That is what his earthly ministry led to. It looked like a spectacular failure. But to the last, the vision and the confidence of our Lord remained undimmed. In Christ, an amazing reversal becomes manifest. Failure and reversal is no reason at all for the loss of hope. Rather, it is the reason for hope. The Cross is the path to glory, and in God's saving plan, the glory did not come without the Cross. It was necessary that the Son of Man suffer in order to enter into his glory. All this is to say that the natural life of hope finds its surest and truest home in the Christian life. Every person is called to place his or her hopes in the surest basis of all — the Person and teaching of Christ.



Saturday of the Third Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):1, 6 O sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth. In his presence are majesty and splendour, strength and honour in his holy place.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, direct our actions according to your good pleasure, that in the name of your beloved Son we may abound in good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 12:1 7a, 10-17; Psalm 51:12-17;
Mark 4:35-41

That day when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, Let us go over to the other side. Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a

cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, Teacher, don't you care if we drown? He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, Quiet! Be still! Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? They were terrified and asked each other, Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him! (Mark 4: 35-41)

Answering our Prayer A notable feature of many of the religions of man is *myth*. Myth — rather than philosophical reason or empirical science — is dominant. We notice that the mythical deities of many of the religions appear very arbitrary. In the myths, they often do what they like, often to the point of appearing lawless. In this, perhaps they project the pining of man who sees in them a state of existence not subject to the stony oppression of so much of human life. But now, by contrast the one true God who revealed himself to Abraham, Moses and the prophets, and then fully and definitively in Jesus Christ, is not arbitrary. He is good, and he requires goodness. Be holy, he commanded, for I am holy. God commands that we do what is

objectively good, and that we avoid what is objectively evil. As opposed to so many of the gods, the one true God consistently binds himself to what is objectively good, which, of course, has its foundation in his own nature. The point I am making is that God, in being absolutely supreme and almighty, is not arbitrary. He does not do things simply because (as we say) "he wants to." He acts with consistency. That said, let our gaze turn again to Jesus, the almighty Son of the Father, asleep on a cushion in the buffeted boat. It is a powerful image of the Incarnation, of God becoming thoroughly man by taking to himself a human nature. In that incarnate setting, though he is God, he subjects himself to his human condition. He is overcome by sleep because of an exhaustion far greater than that of his disciples, for he had worked far harder than they. The pounding storm could not awake him. This respect for the condition he assumed — as exemplified in his exhaustion and sleep — let us take to be an image of God's respect for the laws of the world he sustains. He acts as Creator and Father of us all in ways that are not arbitrary. He is not one of the gods of the religions, doing this and doing that in accord with his whims

or in response to a range of pressures applied to him by mortals or other supernatural powers. He is sovereign, consistent, and respectful of his own plan and of what is right and good. This ought be kept in mind in our prayer before God.

In our Gospel passage today (Mark 4:35-41) the disciples are terrified at the fury of the storm, and see that they are in imminent danger of going down. They vigorously wake our Lord and force his attention to their plight. Notice that they do not ask him to quell the storm — their amazement at his doing this, suggests that this had not occurred to them as being possible. They were rousing our Lord in desperation, not sure what there was to be done, but appealing to him nevertheless. Then in response to their appeal, the great miracle occurred. Now, the two stages of our Gospel scene of the boat can each be taken as symbolic of the ways of God. There is Christ asleep on the cushion, and there is Christ commanding the storm. The spectacular miracle is clearly an exception to the divine ways, while Christ in repose may be taken as typical of his ordinary ways. God

normally acts in accord with the laws of the world he sustains. He continually sustains the world but normally according to the laws he has implanted. This pattern has implications for our prayers to him. God can and occasionally does act miraculously (in response to prayer), suspending the laws he himself has instituted, and our Gospel scene gives an instance of this. However, God can and does also answer our prayers through the ordinary laws of the world. Let me give an example. I knew a person who was driving along a freeway and his mind was distracted. His foot inadvertently pressed on the accelerator and he exceeded the speed limit in an area where there were traffic cameras. Just before he reached a camera, there suddenly came to him the awareness that he was speeding. He pressed on his brake and thus avoided the camera. He was convinced that he had been helped from above to avoid a serious traffic penalty. But there was no "miracle." He had been helped by God in and through the normal processes of thought. Then again, if we pray for some request and it is not immediately granted, we must keep up our prayers because God may be biding his time for the right moment. A tiny push by him

within the normal processes of life could grant to us what we are praying for. I suspect that this is the way God normally works. He *extends* a favourable situation, or gives some tiny factor an imperceptible *nudge*.

Let the image of the sleeping Christ remind us that God normally acts within ordinary processes. He can easily answer our prayers in a miraculous fashion, if it serves his plan for us and for his glory. Thus we see Christ standing in the boat and commanding the wind and the sea to be calm. But usually he works in accord with the ordinary processes of the world he sustains. God is our Creator and loving Father, and he answers our prayers even if it is not usually by a miracle. He is not an arbitrary God. Christ says to us, ask and you will receive, seek and you will find. Pray always, he says elsewhere, and never lose heart. Let us never give up on him, then, and let us turn to him in all our needs.

A Second Reflection: (Mark 4:35-41)

The Presence of God in Suffering

There can be a tendency in persons with a conscience — that is, with a sense of personal sinfulness — to think that if things go wrong, it is their fault and that they are being punished. In our Gospel scene, the plight of our Lord's disciples in the storm was very great: they were almost swamped. But notice why they were in this situation. It was because our Lord himself had asked them to go across the lake. They had been doing what God wanted them to do, and this was why they were in this frightening peril. They were suffering because they were doing Christ's will. Moreover, many benefits flowed from their being in this peril. They were led to appeal to Jesus, and seeing his power in response to their petition, they came to know our Lord better than ever before. In the event, their suffering proved to be beneficial to them.

When suffering or some evil persists, persons can imagine that they are abandoned by God, and that God does not care. Conversely, a person who is suffering or in some peril can wonder why they are suffering if in fact they are not at fault. In our Gospel scene (Mark 4:

35-41), the disciples felt abandoned ('Master, do you not care?'). But they were not abandoned, for though our Lord was asleep he was there. Having resolved the difficulty, he rebuked them for their lack of faith. Despite all the appearances, they were indeed in his care. Jesus was silent, but present.



Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And
gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make
it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 1:4-5.17-19; Psalm 70;
1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Luke 4:21-30

Jesus began speaking in the synagogue, saying: "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They also asked, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" He said to them, "Surely you will quote me this proverb, 'Physician, cure yourself,' and say, 'Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in

Capernaum." And he said, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place. Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land. It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury. They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong. But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went away. (Luke 4:21-30)

The Heart of Man Our Gospel passage today presents the reader with an extraordinary occasion. Our Lord returned to Nazareth, and went to the Synagogue on the Sabbath day as he usually did. He got up to read, read the prophecy that was about himself, gave his breathtaking comment on it, and his townspeople were so angry that they hustled

him out of the town to throw him over the cliff (Luke 4: 21-30). They intended to murder him. These were the ordinary people he knew and loved, his neighbours when he was a growing boy. He had visited their sick, attended their weddings, sorrowed at their funerals, and enjoyed their festivals. As the carpenter-builder he had perhaps built some of their houses, made their furniture and fashioned their ploughs. We can imagine what a neighbour and friend to them our Lord would have been all those years. How could they have turned on him in this way? To ask that question is to raise the mystery of sin. Sin was present in their hearts, and it is present in our hearts as well. There is an old saying — at times attributed to John Bradford (circa 1510-1555) — which runs, *but for the grace of God, there go I*. We ought not think that it would have been impossible for us to have been among those at Nazareth who turned so violently against our Lord. We ought never think that we are too good for what we see others do, for *there go I but for the grace of God*. As we consider the reaction to Jesus as narrated in the Gospel, let us consider the awfulness of sin and what it can lead the human heart to choose. Sin must be overcome! There was a famous catchcry of

classical Rome, "*Carthago delenda est!*" By the end of the second Punic War in which Hannibal and his elephants crossed the Alps, Rome hated Carthage. Marcus Cato, a respected senator, began to clamour "*Carthago delenda est!*" "Carthage must be destroyed!" Well, a similar cry must ring out in our hearts: Sin must be overcome! Sin is the worst thing, and by God's grace it must be overcome.

Our Lord could see that his words to his townsmen were not being accepted, and he told them that they were in danger of not receiving the blessing of God. Elijah, he reminded them, was sent not to God's people to work his miracle, but to a pagan widow. The prophet Elisha cured none of the many Jewish lepers, but a foreigner. That is to say, God would pass the townspeople of Nazareth by — unless they changed their attitude. At this, they were furious and tried to do away with him. In effect they said, "we will not listen to you about our spiritual and moral shortcomings. And never you dare to tell us that we reject God's messengers!" It was an omen of our Lord's public ministry and a manifestation of the sinfulness which is at the root

of the rejection of Christ. This same drama plays itself out in all times and places, including in our own lives. Jesus Christ speaks to us in the Scriptures, in the pastors of the Church — priests, bishops, and especially in the Pope — and at times in one another. He speaks to us also at Mass. At Mass our Lord is present in the gathering of God's people, in the person of the priest, in Christ's word, and most of all in the Eucharist. He speaks to us there just as truly as he did in that Synagogue of Nazareth. Do we, at both Mass and generally in our religion, have listening hearts, or are we a little like the people of Nazareth? When the Church — say, in the person of the Pope — speaks on a point of faith or morals, the response of some is very far from what it should be. St Augustine had the experience of preaching a message that was unwelcome. He once wrote to his flock in these words: However unwelcome I may be in what I preach, I have to say this to you: You wish to stray, you wish to be lost, but I cannot want this. This is because I am a shepherd and God will be angry with me if I am an unfaithful shepherd. Shall I fear him rather than you? Remember we must all present ourselves before the judgment

seat of Christ. I am obliged to be a good shepherd and preach the word no matter whether you like it or not.

As we think of how the Nazarenes reacted to the preaching of our Lord, we ought examine our own attitude towards the teaching of the Church as it comes to us in the preaching and teaching of the Church's pastors, especially the Church's chief pastor, the Pope. Today we are invited to cultivate hearts that constantly listen to Christ. The heart that listens to Christ is a heart that loves him. It is a heart like that of Mary, who was the shining exception to the attitude of many who heard our Lord at Nazareth.

A Second Reflection (Luke 4:21-30)

Dispositions During the second half of the twentieth century some archaeological work was done on the village of Nazareth of the time of Christ. Interestingly, the digs indicated that the village had a lengthy if fitful history prior to Jesus. But in all of its obscure history to that point, there was surely no event so important as the one we read in

today's Gospel. On this occasion (Luke 4:21-30), Jesus reveals to them that he is the Messiah, and that they beheld before them the fulfilment of the promises of the prophets. In the nature of the case, our Lord's words and presence occasioned the greatest decision that the town and each of its inhabitants had ever had to make. It was the chance of a lifetime, and it was lost. They rejected Jesus and his claim to be the Messiah, and so he passed through their midst and went on his way. It is surely a tremendous lesson for every person of every time. Now what, we might ask, did those people do that led them to go so wrong? Why did they make that terrible decision to reject Jesus? Of course, there must have been many reasons, but a simple yet very important one comes to mind. Speaking simply, fundamentally they were not properly *disposed*. They lacked a proper *readiness* of mind and heart to believe our Lord and his word. The immediate question then is, And why was this? Of course we must speculate, but surely we can assume that an important factor making for this lack of readiness was that they were leading lives of religious and moral mediocrity.

The life of Nazareth and its inhabitants consisted of plain and ordinary duties, a daily round of doing the simple things. In those many little duties that made up their daily existence at Nazareth, in unnoticed ways they were failing to obey God's will. A repeated moral failure in little duties, unrepentant and continual, will assuredly produce a reluctance to do whatever God asks. Their rejection of Christ indicates that sanctity was not their everyday ideal. They did not have the moral readiness to hear the word of God and to put it into practice. Perhaps a hint of this is given in Nathanael's answer when told by Philip of Jesus of Nazareth. He said, can anything good come out of Nazareth? Mary was a shining exception. By contrast, let us compare the reaction of Nazareth to Jesus' claims with the reaction of Simeon and Anna years before, when the infant Jesus was presented in the Temple. They accepted the Child for who he was. Why? They were *properly disposed* in the first place. They accepted him because they were open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They were disposed in this way precisely because their whole lives had been lived in fidelity to their conscience. Their holy lives sustained their moral

and religious disposition, just as their moral and religious disposition sustained their holy lives. Their fidelity to grace and the dictates of conscience disposed them to accept God and his revelation when the critical moment came. When God's will became manifest, no matter what it was, they were ready to do it. Aquinas says somewhere that holiness consists in the total readiness to accept and do God's will. This readiness is developed in the constant doing of God's will in the little duties of every day.

Let us learn from the tragedy of the rejection of Jesus by the people of Nazareth. Let us be ready for whatever God asks in life, wherever and whenever it might be. We shall only be ready if we are trying to do his will every day in the seemingly ordinary unimportant things of life.



Monday of the Fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 15:13 14, 30; 16:5 13; Psalm 3:2 7;
Mark 5:1-20

Jesus and his disciples crossed the sea to the country of the Gerasenes. As he stepped out of the boat, immediately there came to him from the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. He had been dwelling in the tombs and no one could now restrain him, not even with chains. Having been often bound with fetters and chains he had burst the chains and broken the fetters in pieces. No one could tame

him. He was always day and night among the tombs in the mountains crying and cutting himself with stones. Seeing Jesus afar off he ran and revered him. Crying out with a loud voice he said, "What have I to do with you, Jesus the Son of the most high God? I adjure you by God that you not torment me." For he said to him, "Go out of the man, you unclean spirit." And he asked him, "What is your name?" He said to him, "My name is Legion, for we are many." He besought him repeatedly that he would not drive him away out of the country. There was there near the mountain a great herd of swine, feeding. The spirits besought him saying, "Send us into the swine that we may enter them." Jesus immediately gave them leave. The unclean spirits going out entered the swine, and the two thousand or so herd with great violence was swept headlong into the sea and there were drowned. Those who looked after them fled and told everything in the city and in the fields. The inhabitants went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus and saw the one who had been possessed sitting, clothed, and mentally recovered, they were afraid. Those who had witnessed everything recounted it to all,

explaining what had happened to the possessed man and to the swine. At that, they began asking him to leave their district. When he went into the boat, the one who had been possessed began to implore Jesus that he might remain with him. But Jesus would not permit it, and told him, "Go to your house and to your friends, and tell them how great have been the things the Lord has done for you and his mercy towards you." He went his way and began to broadcast in the Decapolis the great things Jesus had done for him. Everyone marvelled. (Mark 5:1 20)

The Demons Despite the great continuity between the Old and New Testaments, there are striking differences. The New Testament is a development from the Old, but as a divine revelation it is also a leap ahead from it. Numerous examples could be given of the differences – most notably those directly connected with the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. There is no man in the Old Testament who is the direct Object and Focus of religion. All the figures of the Old Testament point, of course, to Yahweh God as the Object of religion. But in the New

Testament, Jesus Christ is the Object and Focus, all the while himself pointing to the Father. He is the revelation of the Father, and in seeing him we see the Father. He is the only way to the Father, and he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. But apart from the Person of Jesus himself, there are other differences too. One is the open manifestation in the Gospels of the demonic world. Where in the Old Testament is to be found the equivalent of the confrontation between Christ and the demons that we read in our Gospel today? Satan appears at the beginning in the Book of Genesis (ch.3), presenting himself as a friend of the woman. He acts as a marketer of pride and rebellion, and with Eve he makes an immediate sale. He is the Deceiver who brings sin and death. But in the Old Testament he is barely mentioned. There is a mention in Zechariah 3:1-2, and again in 1 Chronicles 21:1, but apart from that the main source is the Book of Job. Satan is allowed by God to bring on Job's afflictions and this is in order to prove his fidelity to God. Beyond that book, the Old Testament is largely silent. None of the patriarchs or great prophets openly confront him and there is no formal contest with what Christ calls the Prince of this world. But

once Christ appears on the scene, the battle is joined in open fashion. On the threshold of his ministry and while fasting in the wilderness, Christ is formally approached by Satan. Negotiations are brought on by the Fiend, but they break down utterly. He can gain no foothold and is sent packing. He thereupon knows that he has before him One whose like he has never seen in his long history as the dark Spoiler. Wherever he goes, Christ seems to draw the demons out by his mere presence.

In this sense, the New Testament lights up the teaching of the Old on Satan. By contrast with the New Testament, the Old Testament shows *by default* the hiddenness of Satan. That is to say, normally he will not be seen or heard. It is Christ who forces him and his cohort out of their hiding places. This flushing out of Satan from his deliberate obscurity is one of the many things peculiar to the Person and ministry of Jesus Christ. The demons can't stand the tension of his being around. They cry out, they abuse, they plead, even though unprovoked by him. From their point of view, everything unravels

when Jesus Christ approaches. So it is in our Gospel passage today (Mark 5:1-20), in which our Lord arrives in pagan territory so as to be with his disciples away from the crowds. He has calmed the storm on the way across – and I cannot help wondering whether the demons had something to do with the fury of the storm. He landed on the shore in "the country of the Gerasenes," and we read that "immediately" a man hopelessly possessed with demons ran to him from afar and grovelled before him. The demons instantly declare themselves and plead with Jesus as with One who has all power and goodness. There is nothing like this in all of the Old Testament and it reveals a fundamental feature of the New. The Gospels record a fight between Christ and Satan. Satan had quietly deceived Eve into a catastrophic course, and then had withdrawn. There in his obscurity he remained, working withal behind the scene of the world. Now, however, he has to appear because the seed of the woman, the all-holy One, has arrived to crush his head. We get the impression of panic in the demonic ranks. All they can do is abuse, put on bravado, plead and ask for consideration. So it is that in our Gospel today the demons drive the

unfortunate man into the presence of Jesus and ask for consideration. Do not torment me! they (the "Legion") wail. They seem even to be playing on Christ's goodness: they ridiculously attempt to bind our Lord by oath. I *abjure* you by God, do not torment me! They want to stay in the area. Send us, if need be, into the pigs! Our Lord allowed it, and as we read, the devils thereupon hurled the pigs to their death – yet another sign of their true form.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ reveals far more than does the Old Testament that we have a choice. On the one hand there is Christ, and on the other there is Satan. It is the same as it was in the beginning. The woman had a choice. She could listen to the insinuations of the Serpent, or she could listen to the word of God. So too with us. We can listen to the word of Christ, or we can listen to the whisperings of Satan. Satan is characteristically hidden – he is as he was in the Old Testament. He is rarely seen, but his presence is a very active one. Christ is present and very active too, and he is the far

stronger one. Let us take our stand with Jesus, following his way to the Cross, and gain with him the victory.



Tuesday of the Fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 18: 9-10.14.24-25.30-19:3; Psalm 85;
Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed over the Lake in a boat a great multitude assembled together before him, and he was close to the sea. There came one of the rulers of the synagogue named Jairus, and seeing him he fell down at his feet. He implored him saying “My daughter is at the point of death. Come, lay your hand upon her that she may live.” He went with him and a great crowd followed him thronging around

him. There was a woman who suffered from an issue of blood for twelve years. She had undergone many treatments from various physicians and had spent all that she had and was nothing the better for it, but rather worse. When she heard of Jesus she came through the crowd behind him and touched his garment. For she said, "If I touch but his garment I shall be whole." Forthwith the source of her blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of the evil. Immediately Jesus knowing in himself that power had proceeded from him, turned to the multitude and said: "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples said to him, "You see the multitude thronging around you and you say, who touched me!" He looked around to see who had done this. The woman fearing and trembling, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell down before him, and told him the truth. He said to her: "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace, and be freed of your infirmity." While he was still speaking, someone came from the ruler of the synagogue's house, saying: "Your daughter is dead: why do you trouble the master any further?" But Jesus heard what was said and said to the synagogue official, "Fear not, only believe." He would

only allow Peter, and James, and John the brother of James to follow him. They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue and he saw a commotion with people weeping and wailing a great deal. Entering he said to them: "Why do you make all this fuss and weeping? The girl is not dead but is sleeping." And they laughed him to scorn. But having put them all out, he took the father and the mother of the child and those who were with him, and entered in where the girl was lying. Taking her by the hand, he said to her: "Talitha cumi," which means, "Girl, I say to you, arise." Immediately the girl rose up and walked. She was twelve years old. They were greatly astonished. He charged them strictly that no one should know of it, and he directed that something should be given her to eat. (Mark 5:21-43)

Faith and Reason If there is one thing which our Gospel passage illustrates it is our Lord's intent that we approach him in complete *faith*. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus in the presence of two of his disciples (John 1: 36) and said, *Behold, the Lamb of God!* He was clearly inviting them to place their faith in the One to whom he was

pointing and then to become his disciples. Forthwith they followed Jesus *as his disciples* because the first words they spoke to him included addressing him as their *Rabbi*, or *Teacher* (1: 38). Of course, there was a certain degree of implicit *reasoning* here, but the principal element was *faith* – faith in the word of their first teacher and prophet, John, and then faith in the one to whom John directed them. In quick succession Simon Peter, Philip and Nathanael placed their faith in Jesus, and became his lasting disciples. Christ did not spend a lot of time trying to *prove*, in the sense of providing a *strict demonstration* to them, that he was worthy of this complete faith. There were indicators which were evidence enough – there was the word of John the Baptist, acknowledged by all as a prophet; there was his own obvious goodness and holiness precluding his being a crank or a crook; there were the prophetic testimonies of the Scriptures (“we have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote” – John 1: 45). The critical thing this Jesus of Nazareth was quietly expecting of them was total *faith* in his person. The miracles which accompanied his teaching with authority were meant to support this invitation to *faith*. So it was

that in our Gospel event today (Mark 5:21-43) the hitherto unnoticed woman, afflicted with her incurable disease, received her instant reward of a total cure. She had grasped the loose fold of Christ's garment amid the pushing and shoving of the crowd surrounding our Lord as he made his way ahead. She trusted in his goodness and power. In a word, she had faith in him. Immediately Christ stopped and brought the heaving throng to its halt – someone had just been healed by him, he knew. He wished to encounter the person, presumably to commend the faith that had to have been involved for the cure to have occurred. The unknown woman came to light and he assured her that her healing was true – she had been “saved” and it had been due to her “faith”. This done, he turned to the synagogue official who had just received word of his daughter's death. *Fear not*, he said. Just have *faith* (in me).

This constant stress by Christ on *faith* in him, a faith fuelled by love and issuing in obedience to his commands, is but the fulfilment of a central feature of all of Revealed Religion. The religion revealed by God to Abraham, to the Patriarchs, to Moses and the Prophets is not one

they themselves worked out (as might a religious philosopher and his school). It is the religion revealed to them by God and which they *believed* totally on his authority. Christ and the religion revealed by him is but the fulfilment of all this, though it is new. But the understanding of this fact might lead to a *misunderstanding* – namely, that *all* that matters is faith. No, for God means us to use our reason too. One gains the impression of Luther, Calvin and the founders of the Protestant Reformation that reason and philosophy are and were enemies of faith. I remember attending a University seminar that considered Pope John Paul II's Encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*. What I noticed was the disagreement by the Protestant theologians with John Paul's confidence in reason and its importance. I think that is a heritage of the Protestant Reformation and the tendency to discount philosophy and, for instance, the philosophical achievement of high Scholasticism. In his turn, Benedict XVI insisted on a further point about the place of Greek philosophy and it amounted to a surprising and great insight. The classical Greek philosophical tradition with its discovery of and insistence on Reason was *providential*. It was

intended by the Saviour God to arise, encounter and (as it were) enter into a marriage with the Chosen People's insistence on *faith* in God's word. Specifically, we might even say, God intended, as part of his providential plan, Socrates to meet Jesus Christ and to collaborate with his redemptive work. This was one principal meaning of the drama of the millennium spanning 500 BC and 500 AD. The Spirit of God was not only at work forming the Chosen People and bringing it to its fulfilment in Jesus Christ, with a view to the evangelization of the world thenceforth. He was also at work forming the best of Greek philosophical thought as present in, say, Sophocles, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Blessed John Henry Newman wrote that "*pagan literature, philosophy and mythology, properly understood, were but a preparation for the Gospel. The Greek poets and sages were in a sense prophets; for 'thoughts beyond their thought to those high bards were given.'*... *there had been in some sense a dispensation carried on in favour of the Gentiles*" (Apologia, World's Classics, p. 28).

In the event, the Christian religion (as had Judaism to a point in, say, Philo of Alexandria) engaged massively with the best of Greek philosophical thought. The beauty and loftiness of Plato was evident to Augustine. Much of Plato's thought attuned greatly with Augustine's instinctive approach, and the story of the effect of Plato on the early centuries of the Church's thought is a striking one. A new step was taken with Aquinas's engagement with Aristotle. The point here is that while God wishes us to place our full faith in the Person and word of his divine Son – as we see intimated in our Gospel today – still, reason ought be highly esteemed and developed. The reason of the one who believes in the Son of God made man powerfully aids in the Christian life.



Wednesday of the Fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

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Scripture today: 2 Samuel 24:2, 9-17; Psalm 32:1-2, 5-7;
Mark 6:1-6

Jesus left there and went to his home town, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. Where did this man get these things? they asked. What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and

Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us? And they took offence at him. Jesus said to them, Only in his home town, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour. He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith. (Mark 6: 1-6)

Faith In reading this passage it is important that we bear in mind its context. In Mark's account – which is probably the account of Simon Peter – this return of our Lord to his home village of Nazareth occurred well into his Galilean ministry. All Mark has had to say of Nazareth to that point is his mention in the first chapter that Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John in the river Jordan. Once baptized and with John now in prison, Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, preaching the imminence of God's Kingdom. In this account, Simon and Andrew are the first to be formally called to share in our Lord's ministry, together with James and John. This call occurs in Galilee, and Capernaum appears to be the base of our Lord's ministry (ch.2). An intense programme of teaching and miracles ensues in

Galilee and it is with the reputation of a great prophet that our Lord returns, in chapter 6, to his own town. They had heard of the miracles and here they have among them once again their relative, friend, acquaintance. We can imagine the simplicity and modesty of our Lord as he resumes a brief abode in the town. Presumably he stayed with his mother in the family dwelling, occupying his room once again. There would have been nothing of high airs about him. His would have been the same simplicity and humility that characterized his life during the years of his childhood, youth and adulthood there, prior to his leaving for the baptism of John. He would have met his cousins – such as "James, Joseph, Judas and Simon" – and friends of the village. He would not have borne about him any studied manner of "the great man." Our Lord was too real for anything of that, too truthful, too accessible. The marvel of the situation is that here was the great God, yet a true man. And so he entered the Synagogue and stood up to read, speaking on the text before him. The village was amazed! They had never seen the like in speech and in wisdom. It would have been the most impressive public words ever uttered in that tiny backwater village

over its somewhat long and very fitful history. This man they knew so well suddenly manifested extraordinary qualities exceeding all their experience of him.

That is to say, they had known him so well, but it was now evident that they had not known him nearly as well as they thought. There was a great mystery at hand, and the mystery was Jesus. He was far more than they had assumed. Were our Lord's townsmen to step forward to acknowledge the new reality being thus manifested before them, or were they to refuse? We read that "*many who heard him were amazed. Where did this man get these things? they asked. What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?*" (Mark 6: 1-6). They had heard of the miracles, and now they heard his inspired and heavenly words, expressing a faultless wisdom the like of which Nazareth had never witnessed. It thereupon placed them at the crossroads, and despite the manifest facts before

them, we read that "they took offence at him." They refused confidence in him. Our Lord came *unto his own, and his own did not accept him*. Observe just one detail, though. St Mark tells us that "*many*" who heard him were amazed, and reacted in this way. He does not say that this was so of "*all*." Nazareth was a picture encapsulating the general pattern. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. He came unto his own and his own did not receive him – but to all who did accept him he gave the power to become children of God. The Nazarenes refused to accept in Jesus anything more than the simple and humble man with whom they had long been familiar. It looks like a common form of pride, a reluctance to acknowledge One who was revealed to be higher and more than they. Sin jostled in and pushed aside the Holy One. They refused to honour him beyond what was their comfortable custom. As our Lord sadly commented, "Only in his home town, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour." Ominously, it meant that "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal

them.” Presumably, the few sick people were among the few who did believe in him. Our Lord “*was amazed at their lack of faith.*”

The evidence for him was so manifest. There were his words of unparalleled wisdom, his existing renown for miracles, and, of course, the moral goodness in him that had all along been manifest to them and which would have been the guarantee of his present truthfulness. Our Lord was amazed at their *refusal to believe*. The source of this refusal was sin and its upshot was that they did not receive the blessings of heaven available in him. Let us learn from this, and resolve to make faith in Jesus Christ, who is true God and true man, the foundation of life.

A Second Reflection (2 Samuel 24: 2)

"King David said to Joab and to the senior army officers who were with him, 'Now go throughout the tribes of Israel from Dan to Beersheba and take a census of the people; I wish to know the size of the population'..." (2 Samuel 24:2)

Recovering a Sense of Sin

We read in the second book of Samuel how David, at the end of many years of achievement, looked with pride and satisfaction on his kingdom. He decided to take a census. He wished to know the size of the population, but the context indicates that the reason for this was his vanity: he wished to display before himself and perhaps before many others what he had done and the glory that was now his. For this the prophet Gad told him he was to be punished by God. “So Gad went to David and told him, 'Are three years of famine to come on you in your country' he said, 'or will you flee for three months before your pursuing enemy, or would you rather have three days' pestilence in your country? Now think..’” (2 Samuel 24: 13). David's punishment for taking the census may cause surprise – it may seem out of all proportion to what David did. Why was he being punished? The reason was that he was arrogating to himself the glory due to God. God had chosen him, God had made him a king, and God had built him up. It was God's work, and David chose to regard it as his. His action was an offence against God, and this brought down the punishment of God.

Reading Scripture can give a sense of the reality and seriousness of sin as an offence against God. Our temptation is to ignore or deny the evil of sin, and the story of punishment for sin as described in Scripture educates us to its evil. Sin is an offence against the all-holy God, and Scripture teaches us its consequences. Pope Pius XII once said that the sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin. The story of David will help us recover it. “David said to the Lord, 'I have committed a grave sin'" (2 Samuel 24: 10). While David's sins are recounted in Scripture, so too is his repentance. Let us imitate David in his readiness to recognise his sinfulness and repent of his sins, for this was part of his greatness – and a principal reason for his eventual sanctity.



Thursday of the Fourth Week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: 1 Kings 2:1 4, 10-12; (Psalm:) 1 Chronicles 29:10-12;
Mark 6:7-13

Calling the Twelve to him, Jesus sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits. These were his instructions: Take nothing for the journey except a staff- no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you

leave, as a testimony against them. They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. (Mark 6: 7-13)

The Supreme Work

Observe two things about the world – it is there, and it seems to be in constant danger of running down. That is to say, firstly, that the world is the great and evident Fact before us. It is there, and it suggests endless reflections on its possession of the gift of its limited, changing and transient being, and on how radically incapable it is of explaining the very fact of itself. It stands before us as a given, while pointing aloft to the Unseen as its Source and Foundation. But there is a second thing about the world, apart from the fact of its being there. It is that it needs constant work if it is to be developed. Age after age, mankind has been setting out each morning to work so as to maintain and develop the world. Man does not sustain the world in being, but he does develop and maintain its condition. This, indeed, is man's vocation. He is called to work. Throngs without number awake from their slumber and step

forth for the day's work – some leaving for the field or the store or the office, others remaining indoors to attend to family and house. Age after age, mankind has been at work because this heaving, throbbing, pulsating world depends on that daily work. Otherwise it will not reach its term, but rather will break down. Work is the key to the development of the world and to the happiness of man who does the work. Now, while the world must be maintained in existence by God and sustained in its development by man, there is a radically new factor that imperils everything. At the root of the world – which is to say in the heart and soul of man – sin has been introduced. It is a terrible poison which has got into the bloodstream of the organism, into the sap of the tree, and the result is that death has been introduced and has spread. So, from the beginning, a new need has arisen and a new kind of work has had to be done. It is the work of redemption. To do this work God himself stepped forth from his home and entered the field of work in the world. He became man in order to take away the sin of the world and save it from death. Not only does he work to sustain the world; not only does he enable man to work at developing the world's

natural potential; he is engaged in the most important work of all, the work of redemption.

Thus it is that in our Gospel scene today, our Lord sends his disciples out on this most important of all works, the work of confronting sin and death with the Saviour. "*Calling the Twelve to him, Jesus sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits.*" Nowhere in the Old Testament do we read of a prophet sending out his disciples with authority over evil spirits. Perhaps a case of it may be when the rod of Moses, become a serpent, consumed the serpents that had been the rods of the magicians of Egypt (Exodus 7: 12). Evil spirits are barely mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, and where they are, man is not presented as possessed of power over them. In this brief sentence of our Gospel today, it is as if the fundamental condition of the world is laid bare, and the supreme work to be done is presented. The world is very vulnerable to the infestation and influence of evil spirits. This is because, in man, it has fallen into sin. It has chosen to turn from God, and as a result its shield has

gone. It stands without helmet, without sword, without horse or armour. It is bereft of its original strength and is entirely vulnerable to the Prince of this world, that grand Prince who advances amid lies and smoke. The work is urgent and imperative. Men of every generation must be saved and the remedy is at hand. The remedy is the Person of Jesus who has won the field by his sacrifice on Calvary. He calls his disciples to his side for the work, and our Gospel today is an early, iconic instance of it. *"These were his instructions: Take nothing for the journey except a staff – no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them."* A great work was now launched and in every generation that work must be going on anew, and we are all called to it. Among all the works of life that we are asked to do, this is the greatest of all, the work of our salvation and sanctification. *"They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people*

with oil and healed them" (Mark 6: 7-13). In all our work in life, this work must be uppermost.

There are those whose vocation is to devote themselves exclusively to the Person of Christ and bringing him to the world. The vocation of most is to serve the development of the world, the pinnacle and heart of which is man himself. They live and work directly in and for the world. But they too must be instruments of Christ bringing the world of their professional work and families into contact with the Saviour. Whatever be our work, we ought all have as our goal bringing man and the world before the figure of Jesus Christ the Saviour. In him

A Second Reflection 1 Kings 2: 1-4

"As David's life drew to its close he laid this charge on his son Solomon, 'I am going the way of all the earth. Be strong and show yourself a man. Observe the injunctions of the Lord your God, following his ways and keeping his laws, his commandments, his

customs and his decrees, as it stands written in the Law of Moses, so that you may be successful in all you do and undertake, so that the Lord may fulfil the promise he made me, 'If your sons are careful how they behave, and walk loyally before me with all their heart and soul, you shall never lack for a man on the throne of Israel.'..” (1 Kings 2: 1-4).

The world needs God David gave final advice to his son Solomon while bequeathing to him a secure kingdom. His advice was the same as that which he had been given and which he had learnt from hard personal experience: obey God and the kingdom will be secure, for God will be doing the building. That is to say, goodness, morality, and sanctity are necessary for human life in not only its private but its public aspect as well. Solomon went on to receive great gifts from God for the government of the kingdom, especially the gift of wisdom. But ultimately he failed in the most important thing, obeying God. He was led to other idols through being ensnared in sin, and this infidelity to God ultimately had catastrophic results for the

kingdom. As David his father had pointed out on his deathbed, holiness was necessary for the kingdom. A lesson for us who live in a very secular culture is that sin is the ruination not only of one's personal life but of the life of society generally, be it in government, in economics, the arts, whatever. The fight against sin must be taken to all aspects of life. God's will is to be the benchmark of not only one's private life but of all levels of public and social life too. Sanctity and goodness is of critical importance for the whole of human existence. There ought never to be the kind of separation between personal religion and the rest of life that results in God and his holy will being ignored in social, economic and public life. The solemn words of David to his son as given above show forth the dependence of the earthly kingdom on the doing of God's holy will.

God is relevant to everything. So then, whatever be my calling in the world, I must bring to my involvement in the world constant obedience to God's will. It is only on this basis that the world itself, and those institutions I serve in my daily work, will be secure.

Friday of the Fourth Week in Ordinary Time

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Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Sirach 47:2-11; Psalm 18:31, 47 and 50, 51;

Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him. Others said, He is Elijah. And still others claimed, He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago. But when Herod heard this, he said, John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead! For Herod himself

had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you. And he promised her with an oath, Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom. She went out and said to her mother, What shall I ask for? The head of John the Baptist, she answered. At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and

his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. (Mark 6:14-29)

Freedom One of the notable features of modern Western society has been the clash of two dominant theories, a liberalism that expresses itself in capitalism, and a centralism that expresses itself in socialism. The one stresses the free initiative of individuals, while the other stresses a central authority for the protection of individuals. It could be said that one point at issue is the question of one's environment. Liberalism hopes for an environment that gives the widest scope for personal freedom, while socialism strives to build an environment that provides the needs of all. The dangers and possibilities of both are reasonably clear, and the challenge for each is to keep everything in due balance. But let us take the case of one of

the founders of modern Socialism, Robert Owen. Perhaps the greatest Christian thinker of 19th century Britain, John Henry Newman, had a brother (Charles) who abandoned Christian belief and became a socialist – more particularly, a follower of Robert Owen. Robert Owen (1771-1858) built his socialist theory on a few philosophical pillars, one of which was the denial of free will. No one, Owen thought, was responsible for his will and his own actions, because his whole character is formed independently of himself; people are products of their environment. The point I wish to highlight here is this stress on man's environment because this stress has become common in much of modern thought. There is no doubt that environment is critically important, especially for those whose power of free and responsible choice is yet to develop – such as the young. But the exercise of personal *freedom*, whatever be one's environment, is of critical importance if a person is to flourish – and our Gospel passage today illustrates this. In the case of Herod we see what happens when environment shapes human action. Herod had the advantage of frequent contact with John. Ironically, he was, we might say, in the

best of environments – with John before him and so easy of access. But what happened?

We read that, with John imprisoned, "Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him" (Mark 6:20). Herod, according to St Mark's account, had some redeeming features, certainly more than Herodias his wife. He had something of a conscience, and recognised and had a certain respect for holiness. But consider how easily and how greatly Herod fell: he suddenly had John executed. While the event was a spiritual triumph for John the Baptist, it was a catastrophic moral fall for Herod. He had been in one environment but fell when he was in another (his own birthday party). What brought about this fall? It was the fear of what others would think. We read that "Herod was deeply distressed but, thinking of the oaths he had sworn and of his guests, he was reluctant to break his word to her. So the king at once sent one of the bodyguard with orders to bring John's head. The man went off and beheaded him

in prison" (Mark 6: 26-27). That is to say, the pressure of human respect and personal vanity in the presence of others led him to violence against a person of great holiness, one whom he knew, frequently heard, and before whom he felt awed. Herod had before him a person of very high holiness. This shows dramatically that no matter what graces are offered (and in John, Herod was offered grace), indeed no matter how near God may be, one must exercise one's own freedom and be vigilant against sin. A good environment is not enough to produce goodness of life. Let us take an even more serious scenario. Consider the familiarity and constant company *Judas* was granted with Christ himself. What an environment this was! Judas was counted as one of the personal friends of God the Son made man. He had the blessing and the training to be a direct associate in the work of Jesus Christ. How could such a person have ever gone wrong? Yet he went so terribly wrong, doing in his own way what Herod had done to John. He betrayed Jesus Christ into the hands of his executioners. He did not exercise his personal freedom against sin.

Sin can bring anyone down if it is entertained, however favourable be the environment. Sin brought down angels. We must be constantly on guard against sin, this enemy ever ancient, ever new, and ever near. Our power of free choice is so important. It cannot be replaced by a dependence on the right environment. Herod was in the right environment (in having John within reach), as was Judas (having Christ for his company), as was Lucifer and the demons in the beginning. We must *choose* aright, choosing to be vigilant against sin and its occasions. Every day let us examine our conscience. Let us guard against sin, especially the sin we are particularly prone to commit. So then, now I begin!



Saturday of the Fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 3:4 13; Psalm 119: 9-14;. Mark 6:30 34

The apostles gathered round Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognised them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a

large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. (Mark 6: 30-34)

God and Man Let us observe in our mind's eye the spectacle of Jesus surrounded by his disciples, who were telling him of "all they had done and taught." Notice the marvellous bond between them. They are all in the midst of heavy and unceasing work and we read that "so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat". They were all hungry and tired, doubtless including our Lord himself. We have various glimpses from the Gospels of just how tired our Lord was at times. On one occasion (John 4:6) the band reaches Jacob's Well at Sychar. Our Lord is exhausted, and the disciples leave him resting at the Well while they go to buy provisions. On another they are out on the Lake in the midst of a heavy storm, and our Lord is in a deep sleep. In our scene today our Lord determines that they will all leave for "a quiet place and get some rest. So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary

place.” These simple events surely remind us of the wonder of the Incarnation. The great God became truly man. It is the greatest thing in the history of the world, the premier mystery, that at a certain point in history and in a certain locale, there was a man who was the living, infinite God. We must not become used to such a thought and take it for granted. The Church confesses that Jesus Christ transcends all other figures in history and certainly all other founders of religions. He is truly God and truly man. He possesses not just a human nature, perfectly developed though it assuredly was. He is not just the greatest man of all. He is first, foremost, and only, a divine person – but with two natures. He is a divine Person with a divine nature who has taken to himself a human nature as well. This human nature, this manhood which is his, is not to be in any way confused with the divine nature which is properly and in the first instance his by virtue of his being a divine Person. Both his divine nature and his assumed human nature are distinct from one another and yet united in his Person – the Person of the Word. The mind marvels at the thought, but thus it was.

So it is that his weariness and his hunger as evidenced in our Gospel passage today (Mark 6: 30-34) and in various other passages are to be attributed to his divine Person. All the works and actions of Jesus – his miracles, his sufferings and his death – must be attributed to his divine Person which acts by means of his assumed human nature. It is God the Son who is hungry and tired because it is God the Son who is this man. It is as man that God the Son is acting in these circumstances of intense work and pressure from the crowds, as in today's Gospel. He assumed a human body animated by a rational human soul. With his human intellect Jesus learned many things by way of experience – such as that the crowds had run ahead of him to meet him when they landed on the other side. At the same time, as man, the Son of God had an intimate and immediate knowledge of God his heavenly Father – by reason of his union, as a divine Person, with the Father. He likewise understood the secret thoughts of people and knew fully the eternal plans which he had come to reveal. He had a divine will and a human will. In his earthly life, the Son of God humanly willed all that he had divinely decided with the Father and the Holy Spirit for our

salvation. The human will of Christ followed without opposition or reluctance the divine will or, in other words, it was subject to it. Jesus Christ assumed a true human body by means of which the invisible God became visible to ordinary man. This is the reason why Christ can be represented and venerated in sacred images. If the burial Shroud of Turin is to be regarded as authentic, we have on that Shroud an image of the incarnate God left to human posterity by Jesus Christ himself on rising from the dead. Moreover, Jesus Christ knew us and loved us with a human heart. In our Gospel scene today we see the very human heart of Christ being revealed. He shows deep concern for his disciples, leading them across the Lake for rest and recreation. Then on alighting, his heart is filled with compassion for the crowds and he gives himself over to their service. His heart, pierced on the Cross for our salvation, is the symbol of that infinite love with which he loves the Father and each one of us.

Let us never take for granted Jesus Christ. He is the Second Divine Person of the most holy Trinity. He is the only-begotten Son of

the Father. He became man for us and our salvation, truly and fully man – and much more so, in a sense, than are we. That is to say, his humanity was full and complete. It was perfect, whereas ours is marred, wounded, crippled and wounded by sin. In this sense he was not only fully God, but fully and perfectly man. Let us be like Thomas before the risen Jesus, and bow down before him with the words, "My Lord and my God!"

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.470-478
(Son of God and man)

A Second Reflection (1 Kings 3: 4-13)

Solomon There is a most memorable event in the life of Solomon the son of King David. It occurred at the beginning of his reign. God appeared to him in a dream during the night and said, 'Ask what you would like me to give to you.' Solomon's answer was most pleasing to God. 'Give your servant a heart to understand how to discern between good and evil, for who could govern this people of yours that is so

great?' God answered his prayer with abundance. 'I give you a heart wise and shrewd as none before you had and none will have after you' (1 Kings 3: 4-13). God endowed Solomon with immense gifts of wisdom. He was a person of great promise. But in the final analysis Solomon was a great disappointment. Not only did he overburden his people, but he abandoned God, turned to the idols of his women, and became ensnared in lust. In view of his gifts, we may surmise that he made choices that were contrary to what he *clearly saw* he should do. They were clear-sighted moral failures, perhaps the accumulated result of countless small infidelities.

This is a great lesson. Being very gifted, spiritually gifted, will not ensure moral goodness, let alone holiness. Even having an abundance of so important a gift as wisdom will ensure nothing unless it is accompanied by humility, moral vigilance, prayer and resolve. We all have our gifts, natural and supernatural. But we must be vigilant against temptation and the occasions of sin, with a humble awareness of

our weaknesses and need of God. It is on God's power that we must rely, while putting to good use in action the gifts we have been given.



Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 6:1 2.3 8; Psalm 138:1 5, 7 8;
1 Corinthians 15:1 11; Luke 5:1 11

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding round him and listening to the word of God, he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking,

he said to Simon, Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch. Simon answered, Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets. When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man! For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men. So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. (Luke 5: 1-11)

Heaven on Earth As is the case with every scene of the Gospels, Jesus Christ is the object of attention in our Gospel passage today. It is the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The people were all crowding around him to hear the word of God and he got into Simon

Peter's boat and, seated as the Teacher, spoke to the people from there. This image of Christ teaching from the boat of Simon is full of significance. From within this boat Simon observed our Lord at his ministry and the need of the crowds for him. Jesus then directed Simon to take the boat out to deeper water and to let the nets down for a catch. In the line of the prophets, our Lord was about to give a sign. Simon, despite having been fishing all night without success, obeyed the word of Christ and immediately a huge catch was made. It was an obvious and unmistakable act of divine power effortlessly effected by the Man before him. Let us notice, though, the response of Simon Peter – a man of admirable religious instincts. His response is the true and proper response to the power displayed by Jesus Christ. It was not just wonder and awe at great power, but a sin-stricken recognition of holiness. In his famous work on *The Idea of the Holy* (*Das Heilige*, 1917), Rudolf Otto describes the experience of the divine (the numinous) as that of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The Holy is a terrifying yet fascinating mystery. While in Otto's account the distance of God from sin is an important element, in the response of

Simon Peter to Christ's act of power it is absolutely at the forefront. Simon sees in the Christ's miracle a revelation of divine holiness. It is as if heaven is open before sinful man and the distance from him is made manifest. Jesus is revealed as utterly other, not merely in the degree of his power but in his distance from sin. His power reveals a holiness that in some way cannot be near to sin. All Simon can do at the sight of the catch is prostrate himself before Christ and ask that he leave him, for he is a sinner.

It must also be said that inasmuch as our Lord would say to his disciples that in seeing him they saw the Father, Christ's power also shows the holiness of the Father. It is a revelation of heaven, erupting on the scene before Simon Peter. The All-holy Father who is in heaven is brought close to sinful man by the powerful deeds of Christ. Simon, full of a sense of his own sinfulness and moral poverty, can scarcely bear it. In this sense, Christ himself is the *mysterium tremendum*, all-powerful and ominous before sin. The devils cannot bear him. And yet Simon loves him dearly. In Jesus Christ, heaven is

revealed and is *at hand*. It is close, and *not far away*. It is winning and irresistibly attractive, because this revelation of power is simultaneously a revelation of mercy for the one who wishes to repent. The power of Christ is holy before sin, and merciful towards the needy and repentant. Blessings and gifts come to man when Christ acts in power – and so it was that Simon's boat was suddenly full to the brim, with the nets beginning to break up. Christ is man's dearest Friend, the Friend who wishes man to be his friend, and not just one who is cowering with guilt before him. He is immensely *fascinans*, attractive to man who by nature longs for the divine. Man longs for heaven. It draws him from the depths of his soul, and here in Jesus Christ is heaven revealed as the object of the heart's longing. And so the appeal comes from the lips of Christ to Simon who is prostrate before the Holy One. "Do not be afraid; from now on you will catch men." Simon is called to be the friend of Jesus and his direct associate in the work of heaven: the saving of souls. And what is it to be saved? It is nothing other than to be the friend of Jesus Christ. This is the Kingdom of heaven, now and forever. The God of heaven is

majesty, power and holiness – and he hates sin. Most true. But in his acts of power and holiness he is revealed as very near in his love and mercy. He does not expel. He calls to friendship.

When we address our Father who is in heaven, we are addressing the God who transcends all. He is majesty, power, utter holiness and as such is above and beyond the world and its sin. But the joy of the Gospel is that in Jesus Christ, heaven has come down to earth and is with us now. Jesus Christ is God-with-us, Emmanuel, and he dwells with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the just. Heaven is our true homeland towards which we are moving in hope while here on earth. At the same time, hidden with Christ in God, we live by love already in this homeland.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2794-2796

(Our Father in Heaven)

A Second Reflection: (Luke 5: 1-11)

God's Power Man has throughout his history been very aware of his weakness and need. He gets sick and hungry, his work often lacks success, his life is beset with many uncertainties, disappointments and tragedies. And there is often little he can do about it. So he characteristically looks to God for the power to attain his goals. In today's Gospel, Simon tells our Lord that he and his companions had caught nothing. It is a picture of man in human history. But at the word of Jesus, Simon cast out the nets once again. This time the result of his action was totally different. Simon was given a display of the power of God. The rest of his life would be lived relying on this divine power for the fulfilment of his life's work, which was to fish for men. All too often we forget that it is only by God's power that we can do anything, and it is to his power that we had best appeal. In giving this sign to Simon who would be the head of his Church, Christ wished to give to him and to all of us who are members of his Church a great lesson: look to the power of God for good results in the work God

wants us to do. Look to God, while doing our very best. It will be good work if we allow Christ to act in and through our own hard work. Notice this: our Lord did not himself throw out Simon's net: Simon did that. So Simon played his part in the action, but its good effect was due to the power of Christ. "Unless the Lord build the house they labour in vain who build it" (Psalm 127:1).

There is a further point. We read in the gospel how our Lord got into Simon's boat and taught from there. Surely this may be taken as a symbol of the presence of Christ in the barque of Peter, and that barque is the Church founded by Christ on Peter. You are Peter, he would say to Simon, on this rock I will build my Church. Peter is the representative of the invisible Shepherd who is Christ. In shaping our whole life according to the Church's teachings coming to us in the teachings of the Pope and bishops united to him, we are being guided by Christ who teaches, seated unseen, in the barque of Simon. It is there that we have constant access to the power and the grace of God which will help us make the catch in life God means us to make. The

power of God that we need for our life's work for Christ is available in the Church of which Peter is head. Let us always listen to the Pope, the successor of Peter, who speaks on Christ's behalf. He has been granted the power to bind and loose, and he holds in his hand the keys to the Kingdom of heaven.

A Third Reflection: (Luke 5: 1-11)

One's Calling Every human being feels or should feel the call to do good and to be good, arising from his natural conscience. This call of the conscience is naturally interpreted as a call to do what God wants, because God is instinctively sensed as speaking in the voice of conscience. The Christian will understand this as the call and voice of Christ. Now, Christ's call is radical and is addressed to all who wish to come after him: *'Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.'* This general call is to be lived out in different ways by different members of His Church. We should all be listening for that same call in our hearts. We know how to listen in to a television set, but do we know how to tune in to God's call? Are there

any guidelines to keep us from following something unreal? Yes, there are. Firstly, there are examples of genuine calls from God by those who have had them, such as those in Scripture, like the prophet Isaiah and especially the example of Simon Peter in today's Gospel. There are also the calls received by the saints in the Church's history. A familiarity with the calls of God to those who have responded to them will help us recognize and respond to our own calls from God. Then there are principles to guide us in hearing our own call and making a right decision. One can sense a call to the priesthood or the religious life, or to marriage, or to the single life as being an opportunity to serve God and man in a special way. Whatever be the call we receive from God, when we find our call or find ourselves in the service of God in a particular vocation, we have arrived at our life's journey. Simon Peter, in hearing the call of Christ to follow him and be a fisher of men, and then in accepting it, had arrived at his life's journey. There are different ways this call is heard. It can draw a person like a magnet, as when Jesus said to Matthew, "Follow me." Matthew got right up, left all, and followed Jesus.

Another way is when a person is torn by different attractions, requiring that the issue be settled by prayer and a good life. Again, another is when a person sits down calmly and prayerfully and reasons out the meaning of his life, what he should do with it, what he thinks would please God, and then makes a decision which is in accord with his best lights. When he comes to what he thinks is the right decision, he offers it to God, and if he finds a lasting sweetness and peace of heart in this decision, he has reason to hope that it pleases God and that he has "come home", as it were. If not, he keeps searching. He may ask himself, What would our Lady do if she were in my shoes? When I am lying on my deathbed, about to go home to God, what will I wish I had decided at this moment? Each of us, then, has this question to answer: To what am I called? If we are already in a permanent state of life, whether of marriage or the religious life or the priesthood, the answer is that we are to offer to God our total service within that vocation we have. Holiness is found in being faithful to the duties of the state of life we have chosen, since that is what pleases God. Christ and the Church need the vocations of all: priests and religious and the

enormous potential of the laity, involving the whole people of God in the work of God. Christ's lay faithful bear witness to the Gospel through their life of service in the spirit and manner of Christ. In their everyday life at home and at work, wherever, by means of their Christlike service they are called to make the world more what God wants it to be. So then, what have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What shall I do for Christ? Can I do anything to see that people have jobs and housing, or to stop the spread of abortion, or to bring people together in friendship in my home, workplace or parish, or to influence the political process for family oriented legislation?

There are many things I can do for Christ. Perhaps I could teach Christian doctrine in catechetical classes in my parish or improve my parish spiritually by building up this or that element in its life, making it a Eucharistic community in which Christ reigns. Let us ponder the call of Simon Peter and appreciate that this call is addressed by Christ to each one of us. What, then, have I done for Christ to this point? What am I doing for him now? What shall I do for him in the future?

Monday of the Fifth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 8:1 7, 9 13; Psalm 132:6 10; Mark 6:53 56

When Jesus and his disciples had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognised Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went- into villages, towns or countryside- they placed the sick in the market places. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed. (Mark 6:53-56)

Mystery made present

One of the great religious minds of the nineteenth century was John Henry Newman (1801-1890), author of numerous volumes of religious writings of various kinds and over thirty volumes of correspondence – much of the correspondence having great religious and theological significance. In 1864 he produced his account of the history of his religious opinions, the *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. In that book he identifies a key facet of his mind: its propensity to see the world as a veil hiding and yet manifesting the Unseen beyond. His natural tendency was to notice anything that indicated the fact and the presence of the Supernatural – which is to say, the divine. As a result of this, he responded with alacrity to a philosophy which viewed the material world as a kind of sacrament of an unseen realm – such as the philosophy of Clement of Alexandria in the early Church, and of the Anglican Bishop Butler in the eighteenth century. So, “Nature was a parable: Scripture was an allegory: pagan literature, philosophy, and mythology, properly understood, were but a preparation for the Gospel” (*Apologia*, p. 28). An attitude such as this runs very counter to what has become typical of the modern mind. The

modern mind trusts the reality of the natural and visible world, and distrusts talk of the supernatural. We of the modern age tend to espouse Naturalism. Nature is all there is, and all basic truths are truths of nature. There is nothing immaterial. This assumption is vastly different from that of mankind in the broad sweep of history – and it is very different from what we see in today's Gospel. In today's Gospel we read that as soon as Jesus and his disciples got out of the boat, "people recognised Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went – into villages, towns or countryside – they placed the sick in the market places. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed" (Mark 6:53-56). The people recognized that in Jesus the divine was being revealed. God was revealing his power and his goodness. Behind the veil of the humanity of Jesus an invisible Mystery was present.

The people did not know the extent to which Jesus of Nazareth was a revelation of the unseen God, but it was obvious to them that to

some extent he was – as were the great prophets before him. I remember years ago when I was giving a religion class in a state high school, I asked the students before me how they would describe God. One boy said that God was a *good spirit*. So for him, two features stood out in the idea of God: he was not material, and he was good. If questioned just a little more, he would probably also have said that God is powerful. In our Gospel passage today, the people knew that God was the great unseen Spirit, that he was good, and that he was powerful. He was working in and through Jesus of Nazareth, especially in his healings. Now, the entire life of Jesus Christ is a revelation of the unseen God. As Pope Benedict XVI often repeated, Jesus Christ is the face of God. What was visible in the earthly life of Jesus leads us to the invisible mystery of his divine sonship: "whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9), he told his disciples. Furthermore, even though salvation comes completely from the Cross and Resurrection, the entire life of Christ is a mystery of redemption. Everything that Jesus did, said, and suffered had for its aim the salvation of fallen human beings and the restoration of their

vocation as children of God. In this sense the life of Christ was a Mystery: the Mystery that has been hidden in God and now revealed to us. Thus it was that St John could write in the Prologue of his Gospel that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We saw his glory, the glory of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The humanity of Jesus Christ both veiled and manifested the great God, the Mystery of mysteries. So it is that every Gospel scene, whether it be of Christ in his infancy, Christ as in our scene today, Christ on the Cross, or Christ risen, is full of wonder for the Christian. The Gospels are the heart of the inspired Scriptures for they present the Mystery visible before us.

We have a far fuller understanding of Jesus Christ than did those of our Gospel scene today, who hurried to him from all directions seeking from him the blessing of a divine healing. We know who he really is and what he has really done for mankind. We, more than they, have every reason to hurry to him from all directions seeking the heavenly blessings he has come to give. Let us never lapse into a form

of Naturalism. It is the snare of modern times. The world is very real, but far more real is what is behind it: the triune God, brought to man by Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.512-519
(Christ's Life a Mystery)

A Second Reflection: (Mark 6:53-56)

Christ is in you The people recognised our Lord's compassion and his power to save from incurable suffering. He did whatever they asked of him in terms of their suffering – all they needed to do was come to him and ask. That was then. Where is Christ in respect to suffering now? St Paul says that as a result of our baptism Christ is in us, our hope of glory. Our calling is to co-operate with the work of grace in being transformed into Christ. One fundamental facet of this is our response to the suffering of others. Every occasion in which we see someone suffering presents the opportunity to allow Christ to act in and through us, as if he himself were before that suffering person. As

if he were there? How can this be? How can this be? Christ dwells *within us* if we are in the state of grace. Therefore he is actually there, before that suffering individual, in *our own person*. He is there just as truly as he was before the suffering persons who were brought to him in our Gospel today. But are we fit instruments of his presence and action? Is he able to act through us, bringing help and relief to that suffering person through our own compassionate and effective response? Or do we constitute an obstacle to his desire to help that person through us, because of our lack of compassion? A great help to growth in Christlike kindness is the constant remembrance of Christ's presence within us.

We should have the daily ambition to allow Christ to take over our whole person, such that under the prompting of the Holy Spirit we respond to suffering with the spirit of mercy that he constantly showed. Thus will the suffering person recognise Christ in us, just as *we* should recognise the suffering Christ *in him*. "If you do it to the

least of these, you do it to me.” As St Paul writes, Christ is in you,
your hope of glory.



Tuesday of the Fifth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 8:22 23, 27 30; Psalm 84:3-5, 10-11;
Mark 7:1 13

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were unclean, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the market place they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe

many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands? He replied, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. And he said to them: You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that. (Mark 7:1-13)

Religion of the Heart

It can be an interesting exercise to sit in a busy human thoroughfare and watch. It might be a busy airport, a bustling inner-city commercial centre, or a thronging plaza. Some people are hurrying, preoccupied with what they have at hand. Others are walking in company with others, talking with animation or in leisurely manner, as the case may be. The whole mass of people surges this way or that, their minds full of various issues. Now, watch the lips of some: they appear to be talking to themselves. Their hearts are full of certain matters and they are acting them out in their silent speech. Observe the variation in dress and manner – it bespeaks the variation in the hearts of the people who are there. In a sense, we may say that the range of human phenomena – which is to say, the variety of dress, manner, work, goals and everything else that characterizes the life of man – manifests the unseen and varied life of the human heart. Only God sees the heart of man, and he sees all. What a world, then, does he see! Let us put it this way. Is there a key to the course of human history, and to the future of man? Inasmuch as every human being is, by God's creative will, immortal, what is the key to the eternal

destiny of mankind? The key does not lie in the physical constitution of the world, nor in the state of the environment, nor in the inter-galactic movement of the universe. The key does not lie in economics, nor, as such, in politics. At root, it lies in what goes on in the human heart. What I am thinking, wanting and intending is what my life depends on. What mankind is thinking, wanting and intending is what the eternal destiny of man will depend on. That is to say, it is the heart of man that will decide the fate of the world. The most important goal a person can set himself in life is to do whatever can be done to ensure that his heart becomes objectively right – which is to say, pleasing to the God who always sees it. This means combating and overcoming the sin that grips the human heart, and turning it to God.

In our Gospel today (Mark 7: 1-13) we read that "the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?" The religious leaders observed the religious practice of Christ's disciples and found it deeply wanting. Let us notice, by the

way, that they did not accuse Christ himself of this – even though undoubtedly he, too, did not bother with such excessive washing practices. They did not confront him because, perhaps, they feared him in any direct debate. But they made their point by criticizing his disciples. Our Lord's response was to draw immediate attention to the vast disparity between their observable practice and the unseen state of their hearts. Their hearts were very far from God. As we read, “He replied, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’” The prophet Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God, said that the people were not honouring God in their hearts – and it was a religion of the heart that God required. Our Lord applied these words of Isaiah to his critics who were insisting on the ceremonial washing before eating. Our Lord required a religion of the heart. It is this above all that we must concentrate on, understanding all the while, of course, that it will flow out into an obedient observance of God's commandments in everyday life. There is indeed an external religion, but external obedience to God's law is the fruit of internal obedience to

his will. Our Lord said that the one who loves him keeps his commandments – which is to say that it is love for him that is the foundation of a religion of external observance. The religion of the heart shapes religious practice. I remember watching a film of an Eastern-rite Catholic monastery and the devout singing of the Divine Office was shown. A priest who was over ninety years of age was shown in this Divine Service, devoutly engaged in the whole ceremony of prayer. His heart was entirely in it. His devout religious practice, his external behaviour before God, was the manifestation of a profound religion of the heart.

Let us endeavour every day to purify our heart and to make of it a true temple of the triune God. One of the greatest mysteries and blessings of the Christian religion is that the baptized Christian, who is in the state of grace, has the triune God dwelling within his soul. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwell within. How could such a religion not be primarily a religion of the heart? What a travesty it would be for our religion to consist primarily in external observance

alone! Let us then strive to give our hearts to God, combating the sin that is within and which strives to gain possession, whether it be by anger, jealousy, lust – or whatever. God must have our hearts.

A Second Reflection (1 Kings 8: 22 30)

"Yet will God really live with men on the earth? Why, the heavens and their own heavens cannot contain you. How much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8: 22-30).

The Eucharist Solomon is in wonderment at the thought that the Temple would be the dwelling place of God who cannot be contained by the heavens and the earth. It required an act of faith on his part. He was filled with a sense of the privilege accorded to him and to the chosen people. God had a house among them. Now we have a far greater reality and mystery in our midst. It is the holy and most august Eucharist. We have the Mass and the abiding Eucharistic presence of Jesus in our churches. Whenever we think of Jesus, whenever we imagine him, whenever we think of his abiding presence in the Church

till the end of time, we should in the first instance think of the Eucharistic Jesus. It is as the Eucharist that the Lord Jesus is most fully and intensely present in the Church. The Eucharist is the heart and soul of every parish and of the Catholic community, indeed of the whole universal Catholic Church. St Paul writes that in Christ we have every heavenly blessing. Inasmuch as the Eucharistic Jesus resides in our parish church, it is the locale of every heavenly blessing. But we must believe this and strive daily to *realise* this truth. The Eucharist is the summit and the source of our whole Christian life – such is the Church's teaching. The spiritual life of an individual and of a parish is to be measured by this standard.

Solomon's prayer is a type and forerunner of the prayer that ought fill the heart of the Christian whose life has its centre in the wondrous reality that is the Eucharist, present in each of our churches.



Wednesday of the Fifth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94): 6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 10:1 10; Psalm 37:5 6, 30 31, 39 40;
Mark 7:14 23

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean'. After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. Are you so dull? he asked. Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside

can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body. (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) He went on: What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'. (Mark 7: 14-23)

The Human Heart

A young person has just finished school. It has been a hard if promising period of his life. He has finished his final exams and has done well enough. He has successes to his credit and also failures – although he does not think much of the failures. He now embarks on his higher studies. University passes by, he graduates for his chosen career, and he makes his way in his profession. He marries and begins to raise a family. The years bring their share of achievements and many frustrations and sorrows. He wishes to grow in his Christian faith and the difficult realities of life are borne in on him. He is now in his late middle age, and he sees that while God has

cared for him and has given him a work in life, the great problem has been, and is, his broken, sinful self. More years pass and there remains the daily inner struggle. From within his heart all kinds of odious thoughts and desires surge. He is inveterately unforgiving – even though he wishes he were not. He is jealous and hateful of those who have hurt him – even though he wishes he were not. He is sad that his ambitions have been unfulfilled – even though he wishes he were not. He sees that much of the difficulty of life – though not all, of course – has been due to his own selfishness and pride in dealing with those whom Providence has placed in his path. As the years advance a species almost of gloom comes across him, as he sees more and more vividly the corrupted character of his heart and how serious a challenge it presents. Sin seems to be rising inexorably into view from within his depths. This is the hidden burden of his life which he divulges only to his priest when he comes for the Sacrament of Penance, which he does regularly. He has the consolation of wife and family, but the basic issue remains. His profoundly flawed self remains. The crisis of his life comes into full view: it is what is to be done about his own bad

heart. But a few years remain to him – will it all be a hidden and hopeless failure?

In one important respect, such a person has passed from the shadows into the light of truth. He has come to see that it is from within a person's heart that the evil things of life spew forth. Of course, he understands that various evils in the world do not (in an obvious sense) come directly from man himself. Nevertheless, in view of the fact that so much evil and suffering does, it is but a short step to accept the revealed doctrine that evil and death entered the world through the wicked choice of man. Man and woman came from the hand of God, uncorrupted. Their hearts were pure and totally integrated for good. But they chose to rebel, and mysteriously all of life was thrown out of order and set on the path to death. The linchpin had gone and the break-up immediately began. Thus it is that while good tendencies remain in the heart of man, there is within him a powerful and sinful disorder. If unchecked its upshot is an ultimate death. The person we followed earlier through life has come to see this

from sheer experience, and this is exactly what our Lord speaks of in today's Gospel. Indeed, our Lord speaks of it as something obvious to ordinary experience. "After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. *Are you so dull?* he asked. *Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'?*" "He went on: *What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'*" (Mark 7:14-23). But our man above has appreciated only part of the truth. He does not yet realize the wonder of the Gospel. The Good News is that he is not alone with his own bad heart. Christ has come and has established the Kingdom of God, and that Kingdom is within you, as our Lord himself said. Christ has placed within our hearts the Gift of gifts, which is the Holy Spirit who came to us at our baptism. He, not ourselves, is our hope.

What is the answer to the bad heart that man has wrought within himself? The answer lies in the power and the action of Christ. He is the Saviour of the world. In principle, he has taken away its sin. But this redemptive work must be brought to each and to all. It must be welcomed and by active cooperation with this gift of grace, brought to term. There is a further wonder. The suffering that is now man's lot has been transformed by the Cross of Christ into a means of victory – victory over the sin in man's heart. So then, I shall take each day as it comes, leaving the future to God. I shall strive daily to do his holy will in union with the one and only Saviour, Jesus Christ. He will do the work of my sanctification. Now I begin!



Thursday of the Fifth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 11:4 13; Psalm 106: 3 4, 35 37 and 40;
Mark 7:24 30

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. First let the

children eat all they want, he told her, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. Yes, Lord, she replied, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. Then he told her, For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter. She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark: 7:24-30)

Persistent Prayer Our Gospel passage today is taken from the seventh chapter of Mark, and we may take it as providing a typical picture of much of our Lord's public ministry. The first twenty-three verses are taken up with teaching – a teaching directed at the scribes and Pharisees, and then explained in private to his disciples. Then the remaining fourteen verses are taken up with our Lord's healings. Teaching – especially teaching – and healing consumed our Lord's public ministry. We read that everywhere he went they brought to him people burdened with diseases and demonic possession. In our Gospel passage today (Mark: 7:24-30) our Lord departs – presumably to have some rest with his disciples whom he also wishes to form more

intensively – and arrives in the district of Tyre. There, in some obscure settlement in the area, he took a meagre dwelling where he wished to be absolutely incognito. But it was not to be. Did one or more of his disciples make an unguarded remark which raised the attention of some locals? Probably someone there among the locals simply recognized him. In any case, immediately there came out on a search our pagan Syrophenician woman (from the area of Tyre and Sidon). She was determined to find the famous visitor and gain from him the healing of her possessed daughter, who was back in the house. She was not to be stopped, or hushed, or in any way discouraged. She knew what she wanted and this was the one chance she had. She was not going to let Jesus pass her by. No refusal would be accepted. Our Lord had been in circumstances similar to this before – he had gone apart with his disciples and had been met at his destination by the crowds who had brought to him their sick. On those occasions he responded with a heart filled with compassion. What he asked for was faith. We remember the praise he accorded the faith of the centurion who had asked him to come and heal his servant. It is inconceivable that his

reserved reply to the cries and clamouring of our pagan woman was the result of disinterest or impatience. Rather, he was drawing out and testing her faith.

There is so much to be prayed for! The Syrophenician woman is surely a symbol of the pain, the suffering, the oppression and the hopes of the world, profoundly broken as it is by sin. So many are, for various reasons, clamouring to be relieved of their distress. Yet the world moves on inexorably, and like a vast sea it seems to envelop without a trace anything that falls to it. For so many, the pain of life is great and beyond the effective assistance of friends and passers-by. The only one who can possibly help is God – who, the Christian knows, is Jesus Christ. He is God-with-us. We must turn to God in our need, but do we believe that this is of any use? The foundation of so much of religion is human need – we need the help of God to hold on to life and to flourish. The springs of religion are the frustrations of life, for which we ask God's help. St Alphonsus Liguori says somewhere in his many spiritual writings that if a person refuses to

pray he cannot be saved. He is referring especially to the prayer of petition, and he says that this, the prayer of petition, is the most important prayer. It is precisely for failing to ask God for benefits, especially spiritual benefits, that very many people go wanting. In the plan of God, the more we ask for, and the more reverently and humbly we ask for it, the better. Our Lord said that if we ask we shall receive and if we seek we shall find. He also said that we should pray always and never lose heart. But we may well find that there is a delay, with no immediate response. What then, do we do? Our temptation will be to give up on God. A common complaint is that prayer not only involves delay, but that it results in nothing. We seem to be ignored and even rebuffed. Ah! how like the case of the Syrophenician woman! In the face of this experience and these thoughts, do we show our faith in God's love and power by our persistence, or do we just drop God? To drop God would be a serious lapse. If someone is sick or an important work is ahead, and we have the feeling that it would be to the honour of God were we to pray for that intention, then let us pray for it and pray persistently.

Granted that there is a God and that Jesus Christ is his divine Son; granted that he loves us tenderly; granted that Christ our God and Saviour remains with us in the Church, persistence in prayer gives him honour and glory. If it is not God's will that our specific intention be granted, assuredly there is a gracious reason for this, and we may confidently expect that a better answer will be given than the one for which we prayed. Let us take to heart the example of the Syro-Phoenician woman and how she pleased our Lord by her persistent prayer. Prayer, persistent and faith-filled prayer, is the most powerful thing in the world.



Friday of the Fifth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

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Scripture today: 1 Kings 11:29 32; 12:19; Psalm 81:10 15;
Mark 7:31 37

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spat and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and

with a deep sigh said to him, Ephphatha! (which means, Be opened!). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. He has done everything well, they said. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. (Mark 7: 31-37)

God's Ways In the vicinity of Tyre our Lord had striven to spend a little time in solitude with his disciples, but it did not happen. He was found out, and was successfully badgered by the pagan Syro-Phoenician woman to heal her daughter of some demonic infestation. Doubtless, just as the woman had discovered her Benefactor, so she brought him to the attention of others. So our Lord, with his heart full of love and compassion, moved on – circuitously – to the Decapolis region (Greek: *deka*, ten; *polis*, city: the Ten Cities). The Decapolis settlements were centres of Greek and Roman culture in an area that was otherwise Semitic. With the exception of Damascus, the "Region of the

Decapolis" was located roughly in modern day Jordan. We are not told how long he stayed here – perhaps only very briefly, and as with Tyre, it was largely a Gentile area. But again, here too he was prevailed upon to heal. We read that "some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man." The petitioners certainly had faith – all they required of him was that he touch the man with his hand. That was all that was necessary – but, intriguingly, we notice that our Lord does not do this. With the importunate Canaanite woman our Lord simply says his word, and the woman went back to her home calmed with absolute assurance about her suffering daughter. Here he does not do this. Despite their request for a simple touch of the hand, there is a most unusual "ritual" – an elaborate procedure which constitutes a bit of a mystery. We read that after *"he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spat and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, Ephphatha! (which means, Be opened!)."* Scholars make various suggestions as to the reason for this unusual course –

perhaps it provided a type for our Lord's action in the future sacramental life and practice of the Church, and so forth. But Christ himself does not say. For his own reasons, this is the way he chose to do it.

We are at the very least reminded by this event that the ways of God are varied and often inscrutable. Take one case. The Cause for the Beatification of one recently declared Venerable by the Church is in process. Among the requirements for Beatification is a sign from God in the form of a miracle obtained by that person's intercession. So an obscure sick person somewhere in the world prays with fervour to the one declared Venerable, and a striking miracle occurs which is ratified by the doctors as utterly beyond natural causes. The answer to prayer has come rapidly. Another person prays for a healing, asking the intercession of a different person declared Venerable whose Cause is also proceeding. But no answer comes immediately. The prayers must be kept up for a long time, in faith and hope. Why is God doing things in this complicated and seemingly unnecessary way? We do not

know – but we are reminded of the roundabout course our Lord mysteriously followed in today's Gospel healing. Such are the ways of God. Such is the divine will, and God must know best. Ours it is to submit to his will. Our Gospel passage then presents us with another detail of this order. Having healed the deaf and almost dumb man, our Lord told his friends "not to tell anyone." The Greek indicates a command, a charge. Why did he do this? After all, on various occasions, even with his disciples and certainly with the religious leaders, he would appeal to the works he was doing as a witness to the truth of his claims. Of course, we can easily conjecture as to the reason for his prohibition, and various scholars give their suggestions. But the reason is not given in the text, and perhaps our Lord himself did not give his reasons to his disciples nor to anyone else. The fact is that it was not necessary to know our Lord's reasons. But our Lord's reasons were important, he insisted on this course, and it was part and parcel of God's plan of salvation. But what happened? His insistent order was ignored. "But the more he ordered them not to, the more they

proclaimed it.” They did precisely the opposite of what our Lord willed and commanded.

God has his ways. Such is the divine will, and God must know best. It is not necessary that we see the reason why God does what he does, but what is most necessary is obedience to his will. We must be very careful to do God's will in seemingly unimportant things. If it be God's will, no matter how small the issue, our disobedience will be an offence against God, and our obedience will be pleasing to him. We must assume that the attainment of God's plan for us and for others will depend on our obeying God in the small details of life. In any case, it is God who asks it.



Saturday of the Fifth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 12:26 32; 13:33 34; Psalm 106:6 7ab, 19, 22;
Mark 8:1 10

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance. His disciples answered, But where in this remote place can

anyone get enough bread to feed them? How many loaves do you have? Jesus asked. Seven, they replied. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied. Afterwards the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About four thousand men were present. And having sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha. (Mark 8:1-10)

He is the Answer There is something our Lord says in our Gospel passage today that prompts reflection. *"I have compassion on these people"* he says. *"If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way."* It reminds us of the burdens and afflictions weighing on man. That is to say, it reminds us of the Original Fall. In about 2003 a reporter by the name of Margaret Wertheim had a conversation with

Father George Coyne of the Vatican Observatory. She asked him whether he thought there was intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. The priest suggested that "each star is fired with a propensity for life, but there is no reason to think any of them have achieved this." It might be, he thought, that there is nothing but vast clouds of gas and billions of nuclear fireballs that never reach a biological threshold. But, he continued, perhaps that threshold has been reached and somewhere in the void of cosmological space there are others looking out for us. In May of 2008, Father Coyne's successor as director of the Vatican Observatory, Father Jose Gabriel Funes, wrote that were persons to exist elsewhere in the universe, they may not have undergone an Original Fall from grace. St Paul writes in the Letter to the Romans, sin entered the world through one man and with the entry of sin, death spread to all. If there were not to have been an Original Sin in a race other than our own, the question arises in our minds about the sense in which "death" and its ramifications would be present among them. The question concerns the condition of life in a race where there had not been an Original Fall – though, of course, there

presumably would have been personal sin subsequent to the origins. It is a purely theoretical question but is one that has the practical effect of helping us appreciate again the impact of the *Fall* of man. To imagine a race that did not experience an Original Fall helps us to appreciate the catastrophe of Original Sin in our vast human family, and the prodigious character of Christ's work of taking away the sin of the world. The sufferings that afflict our race have ultimately come from the Original Fall.

I suggest that thoughts such as these can be prompted by our contemplating our Lord's concern for the people. They were hungry and if they were sent away, they could collapse on the way. It is a small detail, but it represents in its own way the common human condition subject to death, sufferings and evils. Our life is radically precarious and vulnerable to countless threats from without and from within. After a few days of miscalculation, a person – a whole group of persons – can be threatened with starvation. If it is not starvation, it might be thirst. If it is not the lack of food and drink which threatens

life, it could be hostile attacks from other men. It might be something entirely interior which threatens life – such as a simple heart attack. These are threats to life, but there are also countless threats to happiness and well-being. Why does life have to be like this? Why does man not possess full happiness and full flourishing here on earth? Why is he liable to "collapse on the way"? Mysteriously, it was because of the Original Fall of man that sin entered the world, and with sin came death, and death has spread to the whole human race. Because of this great fact, man cries out to the great God – however he imagines him – and asks for succour. Thus does religion pervade the cultures and societies of man. But where is the answer to this great and persistent cry? Man lives on hope, but in fact more than hope is possible, for there are facts. God has intervened and come to dwell among us. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. His glory was seen, the glory of the Only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. He came to take away the Curse and, by means of his body the Church, to bring that blessing to all. All of this is surely symbolized by our Lord's action in today's Gospel. "*How many loaves*

do you have? Jesus asked. Seven, they replied. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied" (Mark 8:1-10).

This action of Christ in feeding the multitudes and sustaining them in their need is a portent of the far greater action of his feeding the nations with his own body and blood in the Holy Eucharist. This food brings life everlasting. It is the ultimate answer here on earth to man's radical vulnerability and proneness to death. In the Eucharist, the Fall has received its antidote. The full effects of this antidote will be seen in life everlasting, but that life everlasting begins here and now when the antidote is received. Let us then understand well that life can be ours, life everlasting.

Second reflection: (1 Kings 12: 26-32; 13: 33-34)

Serving God Consider the story of Jeroboam as narrated in the Old Testament reading for today from the first book of Kings. Solomon's kingdom had split asunder, and Jeroboam was king of the northern half, Israel. He flagrantly led his people to worship false gods for personal self-interest: "You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, Israel; these brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" What a terrible thing it is to lead a person, let alone many persons, astray from the truth that God has revealed. We can surely think of so many cases in the history of the Church in which people of influence have led people astray from revealed truth as the Church teaches and transmits it. Jeroboam can be regarded as a type of this. This is not just something involving people of wide influence due to personal gifts or position in society or the Church. It involves all of us no matter how small our influence might be by comparison. All of us have some influence on others, and God will hold us accountable for how we use this influence. And there is this: while we must take care lest we

influence others adversely, we can fail seriously by not striving positively to be a good influence.

There is the old saying that evil flourishes when good people do nothing. God will hold us accountable for failing to be active in doing good and in furthering the interests of God and Christ. The whole Church, including its overwhelming component of lay faithful, is called by God to be a positive Christlike influence on the world. They have received a share in his mission, and the calling to be apostolic.



Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 17:5-8; Psalm 1:1-4 and 6;
1 Corinthians 15:12, 16-20; Luke 6:17, 20-26

Jesus went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there together with a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon. Looking at his disciples, he said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for

you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets. (Luke 6: 17, 20-26)

Choosing Christ I do not think that the principal danger facing the Christian is, in the first instance, the outright abandonment of Christ. This, of course, can certainly happen – and the example of Judas shows that this can happen even to the most favoured disciple. Even with Judas, though, it appears to have happened gradually. No, the biggest danger is that of settling down to a mediocre following of our Lord. "If you wish to be perfect....," our

Lord began in his reply to the rich young man who had asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. The danger is that of not seeking to be perfect in the love and service of God. All through the Gospels it is clear that our Lord expects the very best from anyone who wishes to be his disciple. But our very best requires of us a prolonged struggle and it is the prospect of this that can so easily lead us to lower our sights. We must brace ourselves for a long campaign against refusing to be generous in small duties – against venial sin, in other words. Every day the work must begin anew, and if it does not, then all our life we will remain attached to ourselves and to creatures, much more than to God. We will have a lukewarm and mediocre love for him, and it is this that can prepare the way for an abandonment of him. At the outset – indeed at the outset of every day – we ought make a choice between two standards, that of Christ, or that of the world, the flesh and the devil. The two standards are utterly different and our Lord wants a clear choice from us, not made just once but renewed daily and lived out in the little duties of everyday life. In today's Gospel our Lord sets forth two types of persons: on the one type he

pronounces a blessing, and on the other a woe. We must choose which type we shall be. Blessed and happy are those who have chosen to be his disciples, and to endure poverty, hunger, sufferings and rejection because of their love for him. Their reward will be great in heaven. But alas to those who prefer riches, worldly satisfaction, pleasure and the world's praise to a generous following of him. Alas to them, our Lord says. Let us not be mediocre in this choice.

Now, we must realize that this is the path to happiness. One of the greatest queries of life for man is the question of wherein lies the path to true and deep happiness. I wonder how many people are deeply happy! Is it not *the* question of life? Ought not parents have as one of their principal goals helping their children to understand how true happiness is to be attained in this life, and, of course, attained in the next? But does the average parent know where this happiness is to be found? There have been so many suggestions, so many theories about happiness and how to attain it. Some think happiness is to be found in popularity, others in wealth, others in influence. But God has revealed,

and the Church has explained, that we attain our fullest happiness by virtue of the grace of Christ which makes us sharers in the divine life. In the Gospels, Christ points out to his followers the way that leads to eternal happiness. It is through the living of the beatitudes, and our Gospel today (Luke 6: 17, 20-26) provides us with Luke's presentation of them. In essence they are a brief statement of the mind, the heart and the practice of Jesus Christ, and of what it is to follow his example. Our Lord is saying, blessed will you be if you take me as your love and your model, and woe upon you if you refuse. Our true happiness will be found therein. The beatitudes respond to the natural desire for happiness, a desire that is of divine origin. God has placed this desire in the human heart precisely to draw man to the One who alone can fulfil it. As St Augustine wrote, "in seeking you, my God, I seek a happy life. Let me seek you so that my soul may live" (*Confessions* 10,20). As St Thomas Aquinas wrote, "God alone satisfies" (Expos. In symb. apost.1). Our Lord's description of the one who is truly blessed sets forth the goal of human existence, the ultimate end of human acts. That goal is a sharing in the happiness of God as

revealed in Jesus Christ his incarnate Son. This vocation is addressed to each person individually, and to the Church as a whole.

Mediocrity and half-heartedness in the following of Christ is the ever-present danger in the Christian life. If poverty, hunger, sorrow and rejection were ever to come our way through no fault of our own, and most especially as a result of our choice for Jesus, Christ counts it as a great *blessing*. Our Lord assures us that this is the path to true happiness. Let us resolve to find our happiness in where it truly awaits us, then. Where is that? It lies in love for and union with Jesus Christ, our Brother, our Saviour, and our God.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1716-1724
(Our Call to Happiness)

A Second Reflection: (Luke 6:17.20-26).

Poverty of Spirit In our Gospel today our Lord utters his well known teaching on poverty of spirit: "Blessed are you poor, yours is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Luke 6:17.20-26). Christians are guided by Christ, but there have also been non-Christians who have understood well the danger that riches pose – Mahatma Ghandi was one such. Consider, then, our Lord's words about the poverty that can enrich, and the wealth that can impoverish. "Blessed are you who are poor," is Christ's dictum. Are we convinced of its truth? Many saints, resolving to follow our Lord generously, distributed their possessions to the poor. Then they embarked on their following of Christ. They regarded themselves as fortunate, for they were now poor. Christ was their wealth. Most of us are not called to follow that specific vocation, but such saints as these remind us that the poverty of spirit to which our Lord is referring is a most blessed condition of heart. Are we convinced of this, on the word of Christ? If so, in what precise way are we acting on it? Riches bring a special danger while a degree of

poverty offers an opportunity. The danger of riches consists in becoming attached to material possessions and wealth more than to God. Whereas it is easier for the poor person to turn to God because God is all he has.

Now, wealth in itself is not an evil for it ultimately comes from the hand of God. Rather it is the attitude to wealth and our use of it that can make of it a danger. Nor does mere poverty make a person attached to Christ and to God. Just as with wealth, it will depend on one's attitude. If a poor person depends on God and looks to Him above all, then his poverty will have proved to be a blessing. But a poor person can allow his poverty to embitter him, enrage him, consume him with envy, and even lead him to harm those who have wealth. It is the one who is poor in spirit, poor in his heart, which is to say *lacking attachment to material and temporal things*, not clinging in his heart to material wealth but to God – this is the man who is blessed. This can be the poor man and it can be the rich man, but it is more difficult for the rich man because man is prone to rest his heart in

his material possessions. Whether we are well off or struggling we are called to place our hopes in God. If we are struggling, it could be a heaven-sent opportunity to depend on God. If we are rich, we must beware for we could lose our sense of dependence on God – all the while unaware of it.

Christ is calling us to be like the poor person who depends completely on God. This is the poverty of spirit which characterized Christ himself and which he marked out as the way of his disciples, the way that leads to the Kingdom of God. All our lives we ought remember what our Lord says to us: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."



Monday of the Sixth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 1:1-11; Psalm 119:67, 68, 71, 72, 75, 76;

Mark 8:11-13

The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it. Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side. (Mark 8:11-13)

Prayer of Petition Our Gospel scene today shows us the Pharisees approaching Jesus to present a request. Our Lord refused. It is a dramatic qualification of the assurance that our Lord gave on another occasion, that our requests to him in prayer would be met. Ask and you will receive, he said. Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you. The man who asks always receives. If you who are evil know how to give good things, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. These words of Christ assure us that God is pleased that we turn to him in our need, and it urges us to expect that our requests will be heard because he is our loving and all-powerful Father. But of course, the prayer of petition is not magic. It is not a formula which in the mere using of it has its effect, unlocking a course of events because of its secret, inherent power. Most especially, prayer is a personal encounter between the creature and the Creator, and if that encounter is to be authentic then it necessarily assumes a certain attitude on the part of the creature. It assumes a true dependence, a true acknowledgment, a humble and loving recognition that God is God. If this is not at all

present, then requests presented to God will disappear into the void. The result will be silence in the heavens, and at times a stern rebuke. So it is that, as we read, "The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. *To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven.* He sighed deeply and said, Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it. Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side" (Mark 8: 11-13). On other occasions our Lord was presented with requests which brought silence from him. During his Passion Pilate sent him to Herod. Herod was delighted because he had heard much of our Lord, and regarded this as an opportunity to see the wonder-worker in action. *So he asked our Lord to work a miracle* before him. Christ did speak, with his own sovereign respect, to Pilate. But with Herod he said and did nothing.

There is also this to be noticed – and on reflection, the point ought be fairly obvious. At times even those who loved our Lord and who were virtuous did not necessarily have their requests to him

met. To take a minor example, when our Lord presented himself to John the Baptist for his baptism of repentance, we read that John tried to stop him. It is I who should be baptized by you, John said to Jesus. His implicit request was that Jesus not present himself to him for baptism. But to that request our Lord did not accede. Though sinless he insisted on being baptized, thus manifesting his solidarity with sinful man. Again, we read that on one occasion during his public ministry our Lord was welcomed into the home of his good friends, Martha and Mary – the sisters of Lazarus whom he would raise from the dead. During that visit Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, listening to him speaking. Martha, wearied with the serving and irritated at her sister doing nothing to help her, approached our Lord and *asked that he tell her sister* to get up and give a hand. Our Lord refused her request. Martha, Martha, he said. You are fretting about various things, but only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It will not be taken from her. I like to imagine our Lord smiling at Martha as he said it. Martha loved our Lord and was virtuous – and we celebrate Saint Martha's feast day every year. Her request was not

met. On another occasion our Lord was on his way to Jerusalem with his disciples and was about to pass through a Samaritan village. The Samaritans would not admit them because they were on their way to Jerusalem. James and John, full of indignation, asked our Lord to let them call down fire from heaven on them. Our Lord rebuked them for this request. One might say that requests such as these would naturally be refused, but the point being made is that we ought present our petitions before God, understanding that God is able to judge the wisdom of our request. What God can see may be hidden from us. We ought strive to ask God for what he most wants to give us – because that is in our best interest.

In our Gospel today the Pharisees approached our Lord with a request – they asked him to perform a sign before them that would convince them of the truth of his claims. They were refused, and it was very much their fault. Their hearts were not submissive to God and so the response to their request was silence and a rebuke. Let us in all our needs humbly go to God our Father, asking with persistence that he

answer our petitions, all the while being utterly submissive to his holy will.

2nd reflection: (James 1: 1-11)

“My brothers, you will always have your trials but, when they come, try to treat them as a happy privilege; you understand that your faith is only put to the test to make you patient, but patience too is to have its practical results so that you will become fully developed, complete, with nothing missing. If there is any one of you who needs wisdom, he must ask God, who gives to all freely and ungrudgingly; it will be given to him.” (James 1: 1-4)

Suffering One famous anthropologist (Evans Pritchard) wrote that a key to the understanding of a religion is its answer to the problem of suffering. Buddha sought an answer to suffering by seeking a way to escape it. But by his suffering and death Christ has made human suffering itself a source of inestimable blessings. It was precisely through his Passion and Death that the world was redeemed. If, when

suffering, we unite ourselves with Christ in his suffering (especially in the Eucharistic sacrifice), our sufferings are transformed into a source of blessings for our own sanctification and that of others. Because of Christ, suffering is now not simply a negative. Thus it is that those most united to Christ (the saints), while spending themselves in lessening the sufferings of others, in imitation of Christ readily embrace obedient suffering themselves. The passage from St James 1: 2-4 (above) makes reference to this. He tells us that "you will always have your trials but, when they come, try to treat them as a happy privilege". This is the language of great optimism and meaning in the face of suffering. To suffer is "a happy privilege." We can only look at it this way if we suffer in union with Christ. Suffering is an opportunity, a privilege, because it involves an association with Christ. Further, it will bring with it the chance of true spiritual maturity: as St James writes, it will "have its practical results so that you will become fully developed, complete, with nothing missing." (James 1: 4)

Let us pray to the Lord for wisdom (as St James goes on to advise in verse 5), especially the wisdom to know how to suffer with Christ. It is "a happy privilege."



Tuesday of the Sixth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 1:12-18; Psalm 94:12-15, 18-19;
Mark 8:14-21

The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. Be careful, Jesus warned them. Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod. They discussed this with one another and said, It is because we have no bread. Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: Why are you talking about having no

bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up? Twelve, they replied. And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up? They answered, Seven. He said to them, Do you still not understand? (Mark 8:14-21)

Blindness One of the most common of notions is that in religion, ultimately what is important is that a person be *sincere*. As it stands, this is unexceptionable except that there can be the hidden assumption that while sincerity in religion is important, the objective truth about it is not. Now, it is obviously very essential that a person be sincere, that he act according to his convictions, that he not be duplicitous, that his "yes" be a true yes and that his "no" a true no. It is important that he try sincerely to act according to his conscience. But a person can be all of this, more or less, and yet the crucial element may be missing. He may have no perception of the objective truth. He may be blind. Let

this point introduce our Gospel passage. In our Gospel today (Mark 8: 14-21) our Lord warns his disciples against "the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod." He was warning them against the influence of their teaching and example. The primary function of yeast (a plant) in the making of bread is to supply carbon dioxide gas which inflates the dough during the early stages of baking. The dough is aerated by the action of the yeast. The yeast ferments the dough, producing tiny bubbles of gas inside it. As a result, the dough gets fatter and bigger – and rises, of course. Thus when the dough is baked, there is a 'bold' loaf, light and airy; when it is cut one can see the tiny holes formed by the gas, so that it looks like a sponge. Without the yeast the dough would remain flat – which is to say that to all intents and purposes the "bread" is made such by the yeast. The Pharisees and the Herodians were blind. On one occasion when the Sadducees attempted to prove to our Lord by a riddle that there could not be a resurrection from the dead, he said they knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. "You are very much mistaken," Christ said (Mark 12,18-27). On another occasion he referred to the Pharisees as blind leaders

of the blind. Both fall into the ditch (Matthew 15:14). But this error and this blindness was due to the state of their hearts. As our Lord went on to say in the same chapter (15:18-20), it is from the heart of man that come the things that defile him.

This point about blindness of mind due to the state of heart is implied in what our Lord then says to his disciples. They had completely misinterpreted his warning against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Herodians. "They discussed this with one another and said, It is because we have no bread. Why are you talking about bread as a result of what I said? he asked them." And then he makes a connection between "understanding" and the state of a person's heart. *"Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up? Twelve, they replied. And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up? They answered,*

Seven. He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"(Mark 8: 14-21). I like to imagine our Lord smiling at his disciples when he said this, perhaps shaking his head in good humour. They loved him and strove to understand his teaching and were truly willing to embrace it because of their love and veneration for him. But our Lord seems to imply that even with his disciples, their lack of understanding was to some extent due to the state of their hearts: Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? This was certainly the case, and far more so, with the Pharisees and the Herodians. Our Lord's words point to a terrible possibility, that lack of belief can stem from the state of one's heart. Cardinal Newman during his early years as an Anglican cleric was on intimate terms at Oxford with an apostate Catholic priest, one Joseph Blanco White. Blanco White ended his days having passed from Catholicism to Anglicanism and finally on to Unitarianism. He was buried in the Unitarian burial ground in Manchester while Newman was still an Anglican. Newman even as an Anglican judged him to be sincere but blind – but that this blindness

was due to moral failure. Countless moral infidelities brought on a blindness in understanding.

Many have lacked understanding but have acted in all good faith. They remained good soil for the action of God. St Paul prior to his conversion was an instance of this. He simply did not know better, but responded totally when true light came. We remember the blind man coming before our Lord, who asked him 'What do you want me to do for you?' His answer was, 'Lord, that I may see.' Many saints have made that petition their own prayer: Lord that I may see! Mere sincerity is not enough. We must seek to know the truth, to "see," because sincerity can be blind with a blindness that is morally culpable. Let us pray for light from God that will overcome the blindness of our hearts, and when light comes, let us be faithful to it. If we are not, the light will pass away.



Wednesday of the Sixth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 1: 19-27; Psalm 14; Mark 8:22-26

When Jesus and his disciples arrived at Bethsaida, people brought to him a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. Putting spittle on his eyes he laid his hands on the man and asked, "Do you see anything?" Looking up the man replied, "I see people looking like trees and walking." Then he laid hands on the man's eyes a second time and he

saw clearly; his sight was restored and he could see everything distinctly. Then he sent him home and said, "Do not even go into the village." (Mark 8:22-26)

Answers to Prayer At the beginning of his public ministry – sooner, it seems, than he had planned – our Lord was asked by his mother at the Cana wedding feast to do something about the wine. It had all run out. He gave a simple direction to the stewards: they were to fill the large water jars with water. The large quantity of water was then discovered to be now beautiful wine. By Christ's mere act of will, this radical change involving a form of creation was *instantaneous*. Plenty of other obvious miracles were done *instantly* at his word. He raised from death to life the young man of Nain, the servant of the centurion, the daughter of the synagogue official, and Lazarus who had been dead for four days no less, at a mere word. Lazarus, bound in his linen cloths, *immediately* emerged from the tomb at the direction of Christ. Roused from his deep sleep in the boat, Christ at a mere word stilled a raging storm in the Sea of Galilee. Countless persons he cured

instantly, even at their mere touch of his garment. He formally proved the divine sanction for his forgiving a person's sins by his *instant* curing of that person's helpless paralysis. So obvious was his power to restore and strengthen the wounds of life, that Jesus of Nazareth has gone down in history for many as a wonder-worker and healer. Doubtless in his own day and place many thought just this about him, but this is not what Christ intended. I say this because we notice as Christ's public ministry lengthened he was sternly warning many he cured not to talk to others about it. He fled on one occasion because the populace wanted to make him their king. The point I am making here is that Christ showed that he had the divine power to suspend the laws of nature for the sake of some benefit, and *instantly*. This brings us to our next point which relates to our Gospel today (Mark 8: 22-26). Here, Christ does not work a miracle *instantly* at all. It *takes time*, and it looks a bit belaboured. *He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. Putting spittle on his eyes he laid his hands on the man and asked, "Do you see anything?" Looking up the man replied, "I see people looking like trees and walking." Then he laid hands on the*

man's eyes a second time and he saw clearly; his sight was restored and he could see everything distinctly. Why did he do things this way on that occasion? We are not told – but some thoughts occur.

Our Lord certainly seems to have been playing down his miraculous activity by this stage, perhaps because this was the only thing about him that many people had become interested in. They wanted him just to fix up their physical, emotional and personal ills. Our Lord may also have been giving something of a lesson to his close disciples as to the future (sacramental) anointing of the sick. But I like to think of this scene as being also a *reminder* to us of the way in which God often answers prayers – he often does so *gradually*. On this occasion our Lord took the man aside and proceeded with him *gradually*. It may have taken up to 15 minutes. But might he not have chosen to take even *longer* about it? Perhaps *much* longer? Consider this scenario. Imagine if the people who had brought the blind man to Jesus for his healing touch had been told (with a touch of the blind man by Christ) to go off and he would be healed. We remember how when

the ten lepers appealed to our Lord for his pity, he told them to go and show themselves to the priests. They went off, believing – and discovered that they were healed. There was a slight delay. Now imagine if, on this occasion of the blind man, there had been *no immediate* result, but that the divine plan was that it be effected *over some time* – say, a year or more? This would have been a greater test of faith and more meritorious if sustained. But this is surely the way God generally acts in response to the prayer of petition. He acts *gradually*, perhaps imperceptibly, and often answering the prayer in ways not formally intended by the one requesting. God knows what, behind the formal request, the person is really desiring, and what he truly needs. Further, he is the Creator who, in sustaining and guiding the world and all that is in it, has given to it normal laws of operation. We would expect that in his providence he continues to do so, but with countless tiny “adjustments”, let us say, to achieve his own ends and to answer the countless requests arising before him from the multitude of his afflicted children. Clearly, at times God works directly and instantly with “miracles” to answer prayers – and the Church has

recognized such cases often enough. But our Lord's *gradual* healing of the blind man in our Gospel passage today reminds us that God's answers to our prayers are likewise normally *gradual*, and in a way that normally respects the laws he has given to the world in his ongoing work of sustaining it.

If God seems to be delaying, if we do not see immediate or even gradual *results* of our prayer, we should still have the same faith that God is answering our prayers *as if* we were to see quick results. All this presumes that we have prayed basically as we should, directing our prayers truly to *God*, and therefore recognizing his love, his wisdom and his power. Our model ought be the prayer of Christ himself. We do have one of his *petitions* to his heavenly Father – *Father, let this cup pass me by!* He prayed for this earnestly and repeatedly. But he always added, *but not my will but yours be done*. If we pray that kind of prayer, all will be well with us ultimately. We shall be placing ourselves in the care of our kind and good Father who is the great God himself.

Thursday of the Sixth Week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: James 2: 1-9; Psalm 33; Mark 8: 27-33

Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Along the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They said in reply, “John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets.” And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter said to him in reply, “You are the Christ.” Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him. He began to teach them that

the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days. He spoke this openly. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." (Mark 8:27-33)

Messiah It is generally recognized that the Gospel of Mark is, basically, the account of our Lord's public ministry, passion, death and resurrection as preached by Simon Peter – especially in Rome. Peter refers to his companionship with "my son Mark" (1 Peter 5: 13). It looks as if Mark wrote his Gospel (perhaps after the martyrdom of Peter and Paul) primarily for Gentile believers in Rome who were suffering. Our passage today can be taken as a climax of the first part of his Gospel, narrating (from 1:16 to 8:30) our Lord's widespread ministry in Galilee (including visits to Gentile regions). Who is this Jesus? There is much confusion about his identity as a prophet, and our passage reports something of this. The content of Mark's story revolves

around this question, and it is indeed the question of the ages: *Who do people say I am?* Our Lord then asks the question of those he has called to be his disciples and who, indeed, regard themselves as being such. *But who do you say I am?* To be his disciple, one must get this matter right. It is Peter who gives the answer which is not only a grasp of the truth about Jesus, but is the key to all of the Scriptures: *You are the Christ*. We notice immediately that our Lord does not want this to be known at this point, for we read that *he warned them not to tell anyone about him*. There was a widespread misunderstanding of the work of the Messiah, who had been foretold in the Scriptures. It was desired and expected that God would send another and greater David-like king to liberate the people from foreign occupation. Liberation from *this* world's ills was the desire of so many – an earthly utopia. Our Lord's disciples with Peter at their head, living closely with him and seeing his holiness and his work of liberating so many people from the burdens of Satan, sickness and sin, had recognized in him the promised Messiah. So, as represented by our Lord's close disciples, the recognition by God's chosen people of God's Messiah had come. The

beginning was now made to the grand enterprise of bringing the promised Blessing (of the Messiah) to the Chosen People and to the Gentiles – to all the families of the earth, as God had foretold to Abram in Genesis 12: 3. But there was an even deeper recognition at stake, for at the beginning of his Gospel Mark tells the reader who his account is about. It is about “*Jesus Christ (i.e., Jesus the Messiah) the Son of God.*”

Since we are considering *Mark's* account, let our mind's eye look ahead to the end of his Gospel. The interesting thing about Mark's composition is that while he shows our Lord's disciples (specifically, Peter) professing before Jesus that he is the promised *Messiah*, he chooses to give the profession of his *divine Sonship* to the pagan centurion as he witnesses the extraordinarily holy death of Jesus on the Cross. This is the climax of the story of the recognition of who Jesus is, and may be said to be the climax of the second part of Mark's Gospel which is the Passion narrative (8:31-15:47). The great question was, *Who do people say that I am?* Mark tells us that when Jesus breathed

his last on the Cross, “*the centurion who stood facing him ... said ‘truly this man was the Son of God’*” (Mark 15: 39). We are not obliged to presume that the centurion had a perfect appreciation of how very true were the terms he used of our Lord. But Mark is making his point that, just as in the disciples it had been recognized that Jesus was the *Messiah*, so in the pagan centurion the Gentile world (for whom, actually, a *Messiah* meant little) had begun its recognition that Jesus is the *Son of God*. Of course, he is not saying that the disciples themselves (including Peter) had *not* reached this recognition. Mark was writing for Gentile believers in the heart of the pagan Empire, Rome itself. Jesus Christ, dead on the Cross, is the *Messiah and Son of God*. The Empire will recognize this – as it did at the end of much persecution, with the rise of Constantine. Well then, all of this having been said, let us return to our scene for today (Mark 8:27-33). While Peter, through Mark, recounts his profession that Jesus is the *Messiah*, we learn from Matthew that this conversation between Christ and his disciples had a greater significance. It may have been that, out of humility, Peter gave to Mark and his audience in Rome a reduced

account of the scene because during it, so we learn from *Matthew*, he was granted a high dignity by Christ following his profession of our Lord's true identity. For what did Peter say in answer to our Lord's question, according to *Matthew*? It turns out that he said, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (*Matthew* 16: 16). This profession was the goal of the Gospel of Mark. Clearly it was the goal of the Gospel of *Matthew*, and was explicitly so of the Gospel of St John (20:31).

The Gospel of Mark shows the Messiah ever on the move throughout the land of the Chosen People – primarily Galilee but also Judea (while on his way to Jerusalem for his Passion – 10: 1 *ff.*), and even beyond into Gentile regions (5: 1; 7:24-8:30). Some came to him from Gentile regions (3: 8). I like to think of the emphasis Mark gives to Christ's free ranging public ministry in *Galilee* as an emphasis on his concern for the Gentile world, because Galilee was much more cosmopolitan than Judea. This was the *Messiah*, Abraham's descendant and the blessing for all the families of the earth promised by God to

Abraham (Genesis 12:3). He is the fulfilment of all the promises. He was accepted as such by his disciples at the end of his Galilean ministry as he was about to make his way to Jerusalem for the final stage of his work. Let us accept him totally.



Friday of the Sixth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 2: 14-24.26; Psalm 111; Mark 8:34-9:1

Jesus summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the Gospel will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his

life? What could one give in exchange for his life? Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." He also said to them, "Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the Kingdom of God has come in power." (Mark 8:34-9:1)

Christian Discipleship

The *Symposium* (Ancient Greek:

Συμπόσιον) is a philosophical text by Plato dated c. 385–370 BC. It concerns itself with the genesis, purpose and nature of love, and is often understood to be the origin of the concept of Platonic love. In the text, love is examined in a sequence of speeches by men attending a symposium, or drinking party, at the poet Agathon's place. For instance, in his speech Socrates asserts that the highest purpose of love is to become a lover of *wisdom*. When Aristodemus arrives at Agathon's party *without* Socrates, his solitary appearance surprises Agathon. Besides following Socrates around like an attendant and obeying his every command, Aristodemus also attends to the superficial

details of Socrates' behaviour – he shows an exaggerated aping of Socrates' personal mannerisms. But he does not imitate those actions of Socrates that lead to his being a philosophically virtuous person (which was dearest to Socrates' heart), and he certainly does not imitate Socrates' philosophical inquiries. It is only Socrates, as perceived superficially, that he wishes to follow and he does so obsessively – in effect, he seems to treat Socrates as if he were divine. It looks as if, in Plato's *Symposium*, some of Socrates' followers such as Aristodemus no longer idolize the Homeric gods and heroes – instead, they idolize Socrates. Whatever may have been Plato's intent in all of this, at least we see a distorted form of *discipleship*. Now, this is common in the annals of history. In France, Bonaparte received something of this indiscriminating adulation, as did Hitler in Germany. A leader becomes virtually idolized, the phenomenon being not only bizarre in very appearance, but also leading to utterly lamentable results. Indeed, to idolize *anyone* is an act of the greatest imprudence for it leads one open to being led down the path of harm. Yes, indeed – with one great and resounding exception! The exception is the person of Jesus

Christ. To him is to be rendered total discipleship, for he is indeed divine. Socrates never claimed to be divine in any sense, and in any case would have required of his disciples that they scrutinize in philosophical fashion all that he said. He helped them do this by his “Socratic method”. Not so Jesus Christ. He claimed to be divine and expected of his disciples a total submission of mind and heart, the submission that is appropriately rendered to God.

So it is that we are led to consider our Gospel passage today (Mark 8:34-9:1), in which our Lord lays down the condition of being his disciple. *Jesus summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the Gospel will save it.* Our Lord requires of his followers that they accept him and his word (the Gospel) unreservedly. They are to follow him, denying their very selves and carrying the cross of crucifixion after him. This is certainly not what Socrates expected. But it was entirely warranted in our Lord’s

case because he is divine. He who sees me, he said, sees the Father. I and the Father are one, he stated. Before Abraham was, I am. No one comes to the Father but through me. I am the Light of the world. The claims of Jesus Christ as to his own person and his transcendent teaching are extraordinary beyond any other person in history. They were clear to both his disciples and to his enemies. *We are not stoning you because of your miracles, but because, while being a man, you claim to be God.* If Jesus were not to be what he claimed to be – the Messiah and the Son of God – then he is either a great knave or a great fool. He is neither, but rather one filled with wisdom and holiness, supported by numerous miracles, by the prophecies and by the testimony of the Father. Being Messiah and Son of God, he is worthy of absolute dedication, worship and discipleship. He transcends all the philosophers, all the prophets, and all the world's religious leaders such as Zoroaster, Buddha, Mahomet and so many others. Now, what does being a disciple of Jesus Christ involve? Is it to possess a love for Jesus like the love of Aristodemus for Socrates, concerned with externals such as personal mannerisms? No. It takes to heart what our Lord

expects of his disciples, that they imitate him in what he wishes them to emulate. It is the *heart* of Christ which we are to take as our model: *Come to me all you who labour and are burdened. Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart.* Let this *mind* be in you, St Paul writes, that is in Christ Jesus. We must put on the *mind and heart* of Christ, and on that basis, because of our love for him, do what he commands.

Our Gospel passage today presents us with Christ's stark and demanding invitation, addressed to the crowds and to his disciples, that they follow him, the Lamb, whithersoever he goes. It is an invitation to embrace from the heart what he has embraced from the heart. This means taking up with him the cross of our daily duty and following consistently and with love in his footsteps. To achieve this glorious goal we must pray fervently to the Holy Spirit for the strength and grace that is necessary. *Come Holy Spirit! Fill the hearts of your faithful! Enkindle in them the fire of your love!* We must live in the grace of the Holy Spirit, grow in this grace, and never fall from this grace. If we do fall from the grace of God, we must immediately repent

and reclaim this grace through personal prayer and the fervent reception of the Sacraments, especially the Sacrament of Penance. Let us do this, then!



Saturday of the Sixth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 3:1-10; Psalm 11; Mark 9:2-13

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said

to Jesus, Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three tents — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: This is my beloved Son. Listen to him! Suddenly, when they looked round, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what rising from the dead meant. And they asked him, Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first? Jesus replied, To be sure, Elijah will come first, and restore all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him. (Mark 9:2-13)

The Foundation Our Gospel passage mentions Moses and Elijah — they appear with Jesus in glory. Moses (Hebrew: מֹשֶׁה; Greek: Μωϋσῆς)

was the great prophet, religious leader and lawgiver of Israel, to whom the authorship of the Torah is traditionally attributed. Rabbinical Judaism calculated a lifespan of Moses corresponding to 1391–1271 BC. As is well known, the very existence of Moses as well as the veracity of the Exodus story are disputed among many archaeologists and Egyptologists, with experts in the field of biblical criticism citing logical inconsistencies, new archaeological evidence, historical evidence, and related origin myths in Canaanite culture. Other historians maintain that the biographical details attributed to Moses imply the existence of a historical political and religious leader who was involved in the consolidation of the Hebrew tribes in Canaan towards the end of the Bronze Age. What fuels this academic scepticism is the fact that apart from several scattered references elsewhere in the Jewish scriptures, all that is known about Moses comes from the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – and the majority of scholars date the final compilation of these four books (from much earlier materials and traditions) to the Persian period (538–332 BC). No Egyptian sources mention Moses or the events of Exodus-

Deuteronomy, nor has any archaeological evidence been discovered in Egypt or the Sinai wilderness to support the story in which he is the central figure. Various scholars maintain that while the general narrative of the Exodus and the conquest of the Promised Land may be remotely rooted in historical events, the figure of Moses as a leader of the Israelites in these events cannot be substantiated. Similar views of other scholars could also be mentioned in respect to the figures of Abraham, the Patriarchs and the Prophets such as Samuel and Elijah. In respect to Elijah, who features in our Gospel today, many scholars consider many stories of him legendary, and that, although something extraordinary must have happened at, say, Mt. Carmel, the miraculous incidents of the prophet's career may well have been magnified as they were passed on. Now, we can go a certain distance with some of this – for it is not required that we accept as absolutely historical *in the modern sense* every detail of, say, Exodus and 1 Kings.

As with the Genesis creation accounts, the principal purpose of Scripture is the transmission of *divine revelation as it was given in*

history. It is not just “myth”. The believing reader strives to determine the sense of Scripture precisely as a member of the Church – whose book the Bible is. All of this brings us to the matter of the *foundation* of our acceptance of the religious truth conveyed in the Old and New Testaments. The foundation for the Christian, giving to him real certainty, is the word and example of Jesus Christ. He is the Teacher, and to him we must listen. Was the Bible, broadly consisting of the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms and the Writings, inspired by God? Yes – and in the first instance we are sure of this because Jesus our Lord said and thought so. Are the Holy Scriptures, authenticated by our Lord himself, to be regarded as the only texts ever to be inspired? The Church has not declared on this point – I cannot see why parts of Plato and Aristotle may not have been the result *both* of natural philosophical talent *and* of some divine assistance. But back to our point – our Lord repeatedly referred to Moses and Elijah. He said (e.g., in our Gospel today) that John the Baptist was the fulfilment of the prophecy that Elijah would return to prepare the people. To assert that Moses did not even exist, or that he was not the past Leader and Lawgiver of the

Chosen People, or that he was merely a vague leader of portions of wandering Israelis, would plainly have received short shrift from our Lord, the Word made flesh. In any case, the Gospels give us the striking event of the Transfiguration which Aquinas says was the greatest of the miracles of our Lord's public ministry. In that event, revealing the true glory of Jesus the Christ and Son of God, Moses and Elijah appeared conversing with him about his *Exodus*, his passing, to be accomplished in Jerusalem. They were real figures of the great past, decisive in their accomplishments for God and his plan, appearing back from the dead to support the Messiah in his great work. Their appearance vindicates the truth of the Old Testament, even though it is always a careful business determining the detail of that truth. More than anything, our scene shows us the ultimate source of our certainty as to divinely-revealed truth, whether it be enshrined in Holy Scripture, or declared by the Church. It is the person and authority of Jesus Christ – as the Father says in our scene, *This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.*

Let our scene today (Mark 9:2-13) recall to our minds the pre-eminent and foundational position of Jesus Christ. Above all, it is because of him that we accept what God has revealed be it in the Sacred Scriptures or through Sacred Tradition. In the matter of Scripture – of which we are reminded so vividly by the appearance of Moses and Elijah with Christ in glory – Jesus Christ is not only our authority. He is also the Key to its essential interpretation. We remember how, on rising from the dead he walked with the two disciples to Emmaus, explaining the Scriptures and how they spoke of *him*. This is the essential point. The Scriptures, as Jesus Christ taught, are inspired, and they spoke of him. He is the Father's *beloved Son* – all are to listen to *him*.



Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Psalm 13 (12):6 O Lord, I trust in your merciful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful with me.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, always pondering spiritual things, we may carry out in both word and deed that which is pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23; Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 8, 10, 12-1; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49; Luke 6:27-38

Jesus said to his disciples: "To you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well, and from the person who takes your cloak, do not withhold even your tunic. Give to everyone who asks of you, and

from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same. If you lend money to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, and get back the same amount. But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give, and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.” (Luke 6:27-38)

Merciful God *“To you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”* This is a very striking statement, and there are some, such as the Scripture scholar Ulrich Luz, who have said that this teaching, to *love one’s enemies*, is what distinguishes and separates Christianity from *all* earlier religions (U. Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*. Fortress Press 2007). This may or may not be so, but I suspect that the *natural* response to it is one of moral approval and admiration. My sense of things is that most human beings, by virtue of their natural moral instincts, would assent to this teaching in their heart of hearts. Most would not strive to *live* according to it, but they would tend to accept its moral truth. As a matter of fact, some scholars see a number of historical precedents to our Lord’s teaching. John Nolland, in his *The Gospel of Matthew: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2005 p. 267), tells us that the Babylonian text *The Counsels of Wisdom* contains a similar call, as does the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope*. He states that in Greek and Roman philosophy the idea of loving one’s enemies had been advanced by

writers such as Cicero, Seneca, the Cynics and the Stoics. I have read that eastern Buddhism and Taoism also share (somewhat) this outlook. My point in mentioning this is simply to suggest that elements of this pivotal teaching of Christ are within the reach of man's natural conscience and sense of what is morally good. Broadly, man recognises that it is conducive to his ultimate flourishing. Of course, as with so much of his teaching our Lord fulfils the religion of the Old Testament – so we see elements of it there too. For instance in the Book of Proverbs it is commanded that “if your *enemy* is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink” (25: 21). What cannot be disputed is the great importance for our Lord of his command to love all, including one's enemies – so much so that in common parlance to be a truly “Christian” person is to love after this fashion. Once this teaching is proposed, the natural sense of man accepts that to scale the love that Christ requires of man is the morally grand path to take. We are meant for this by nature. Revealed teaching (with divine grace) fulfils the nature established in us by the Creator.

While this course of behaviour is recognised by the moral instincts of man, what Jesus Christ teaches refers also to its religious foundation. The foundation of this prescription is to be found in the nature of God – the great God is *kind and merciful*. I remember decades ago I was giving a religion class in a State High School and I asked the class who or what God is. One boy put up his hand and said that God is a *good spirit*. While this was inadequate, of course, it did manifest the common view of the ages that God and/or the gods are good. Yes, of course, he is a spirit – but he is *good*. Just what this means in the minds of those who hold this is a further question, but I think we could say that it is rarely thought by man that God is *bad* – for indeed, this is what the Ancient Serpent suggested to the Woman in the Garden. “God knows that when you eat of it (i.e., the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). So God was envious and used his prescriptive power with evil intent. But this is not man’s natural sense of things, and the Woman initially corrected the Serpent for his insinuating question, which was: “Did God say, ‘you shall not

eat of *any* tree of the garden’?” No, she replied – God simply commanded that we not eat of the tree in the *middle* of the garden. This response indicates her natural (and supernatural) sense of God’s goodness. But then she embraced the temptation to think otherwise. So just as there is, in the conscience of man, a natural sense and approval of morally good action (such as Christ’s command to love one’s enemies), so there is in man a natural sense of the goodness of God. Indeed, perhaps this natural religious sense is present in his moral sense, which is to say intimately connected with his sense of moral goodness and morally good action. It is the good God who is present in the sanctuary of man’s conscience, making of it an echo of his voice – and so, by means of his conscience man can gain a natural sense of the good God. So far so good. But! – Christ, in the line of and fulfilling the Law and the Prophets, has brought this to its fulfilment. He has shown us that God is most kind and merciful, to all of us, even to his enemies. *Love your enemies and do good to them, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

God is not just a good spirit. He is the great and infinite Creator who is boundlessly compassionate, kind and merciful. The supreme manifestation of this love and mercy was his sending of his only-begotten Son to take away the sin of the world by atoning for it completely in his sufferings and death, and by rising to a new life that he shares with all who approach him in obedient faith. The Incarnation, the Atonement for man's sin, the Resurrection and the Sending of the Spirit – all this reveals the wondrous love of God for man and the world. At the heart of all reality, which is to say the Source and End of all that is created, is the great Being who is holy Love. Let us be profoundly conscious of how we have failed and offended him, and in a spirit of repentance let us approach him trusting fully in his boundless kindness, compassion and mercy.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2544-2550

(Poverty of heart; “I wish to see God”)



Monday of the Seventh Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Psalm 13 (12): 6 O Lord, I trust in your merciful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful with me.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, always pondering spiritual things, we may carry out in both word and deed that which is pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 3:13-18; Psalm 18; Mark 9:14-29

As Jesus came down from the mountain with Peter, James, John and approached the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and scribes arguing with them. Immediately on seeing him, the whole crowd was utterly amazed. They ran up to him and greeted him. He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I have brought to you my son

possessed by a mute spirit. Wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive it out, but they were unable to do so.” He said to them in reply, “O faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you? Bring him to me.” They brought the boy to him. And when he saw him, the spirit immediately threw the boy into convulsions. As he fell to the ground, he began to roll around and foam at the mouth. Then he questioned his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” He replied, “Since childhood. It has often thrown him into fire and into water to kill him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus said to him, “If you can!’ Everything is possible to one who has faith.” Then the boy’s father cried out, “I do believe, help my unbelief!” Jesus, on seeing a crowd rapidly gathering, rebuked the unclean spirit and said to it, “Mute and deaf spirit, I command you: come out of him and never enter him again!” Shouting and throwing the boy into convulsions, it came out. He became like a corpse, which caused many to say, “He is dead!” But Jesus took him by the hand, raised him, and he stood

up. When he entered the house, his disciples asked him in private, “Why could we not drive the spirit out?” He said to them, “This kind can only come out through prayer.” (Mark 9:14-29)

Satan Our Gospel passage today shows our Lord effortlessly expelling an evil spirit that had had possession of a youth since childhood. It was a tough nut to crack, not for him but for his disciples who had been quite unsuccessful in their attempts to exorcise it. This case was but one more in what was a normal feature of our Lord’s public ministry: *the driving out of demons*. This in turn is one of many differences between the Old and New Testaments, for in the Old Testament Satan is rarely mentioned – featuring most notably in the Book of Genesis (ch. 3) and in the Book of Job (1:7; 2:2). “Satan” appears also in Zechariah 3:1,2. Ritual *exorcism* is found in the Book of Tobit as dictated by the angel (Tobit 6: 7-8) and implemented by Tobias (Tobit 8: 2-3). We do read in 1Samuel 16:14-15 that “the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him.” But just what this “evil spirit” amounted to is not clear

– after all, it was “from the Lord”, and we read that whenever David *played his lyre* “the evil spirit departed from him” (16:23). In any case, the proliferation of demon-possession and of exorcisms during our Lord’s public ministry far overshadowed anything of the kind in the Old Testament. One could understand how a person raised on reading the Old Testament alone might have little sense of the abiding reality of Satan as a threat to the spiritual life of the individual. But the fact is that a great number of *Christians* do not take Satan seriously either. The reasons for this vary, but one reason is surely that they do not *see* or *feel* or *hear* Satan. What can help in this regard is to read of the occasional dramatic attacks by Satan on the close friends of God, which God *at times* in history permits for his glory. Take but one instance. We read of extraordinary demonic interventions in St Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* (251–356 AD), the great and holy desert monk of Egypt. Athanasius writes that when people would visit St. Antony at his desert home, “*they heard tumults, many voices, and, as it were, the clash of arms. At night they saw the mountain become full of wild beasts, and him also fighting as though against visible*

beings, and praying against them.” In one story, St. Antony decided to spend a night alone in a large tomb. A huge group of demons descended upon him and attacked his body. The devil “so cut him with stripes that he lay on the ground speechless from the excessive pain.”

The next day, Athanasius continues in his *Life*, a friend bringing Antony supplies found him and brought him back to the nearby village. That evening, he regained consciousness and asked for the friend to carry him back to the tomb. After his friend did so, St. Antony called out, “*Here am I, Antony; I flee not from your stripes, for even if you inflict more nothing shall separate me from the love of Christ.*” The demons returned, and this is how St. Athanasius describes what happened next. In the night they made such a din that the whole of that place seemed to be shaken by an earthquake, and the demons as if breaking the four walls of the dwelling seemed to enter through them, coming in the likeness of beasts and creeping things. And the place was on a sudden filled with the forms of lions, bears, leopards, bulls, serpents, asps, scorpions, and wolves, and each of

them was moving according to his nature. The lion was roaring, wishing to attack, the bull seeming to toss with its horns, the serpent writhing but unable to approach, and the wolf as it rushed on was restrained; altogether the noises of the apparitions, with their angry ragings, were dreadful. Though he was in terrible pain, he responded boldly to the demons: *“If there had been any power in you, it would have sufficed had one of you come, but since the Lord has made you weak, you attempt to terrify me by numbers: and a proof of your weakness is that you take the shapes of brute beasts. If you are able, and have received power against me, delay not to attack; but if you are unable, why trouble me in vain? For faith in our Lord is a seal and a wall of safety to us.”* Suddenly, the roof opened up and a bright light filled the tomb. The demons vanished and his pain ceased. Realizing that God had saved him, he prayed, *“Where were you? Why did you not appear at the beginning to make my pains to cease?”* And God replied to him: *“Antony, I was here, but I waited to see your fight; since you have endured, and have not been beaten, I will ever be a succour to you, and will make your name known everywhere.”* St. Athanasius

writes that “Having heard this, Antony arose and prayed, and received such strength that he perceived that he had more power in his body than formerly. And he was then about thirty-five years old.” Now, of course, this sort of occurrence does not happen much in the history of the Church, but reading of it does reinforce our conviction of the *very reality of Satan*.

A narrative such as this, vouched for by the great St Athanasius himself, also shows that God is ever the Lord. He is overwhelmingly the stronger one. This is very Scriptural and obvious in the Gospels, where nothing seen or unseen can match the power of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, there is another prince operating in this world and he is behind the scenes. Our Lord calls him “the prince of this world”, and as our Lord’s Passion approached he said that the prince of this world was coming. He was approaching with his forces and he intended to destroy the Holy One and nullify his influence. But this was to no avail, just as it had been to no avail during our Lord’s public ministry such as at the event of our Gospel today (Mark 9:14-

29). St. John Vianney was tormented by a demon for many years and gave him a nickname. St. Teresa of Avila and Padre Pio, among many others, knew the devil well. There are two extremes to be avoided in this matter—fearful obsession with the devil and ignoring the fact that we live on a battlefield, with Satan and his forces drawn up against us. The letter to the Ephesians puts it thus: “*We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness*” (Ephes 6.12). There are two Standards, and the Standard of Christ is already victorious. Let us take our stand with him. As St John writes, *this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith* (1 John 5:4).



Tuesday of the Seventh Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Psalm 13 (12):6 O Lord, I trust in your merciful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful with me.

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Scripture today: James 4: 1-10; Psalm 54; Mark 9:30-37

Jesus and his disciples left from there and began a journey through Galilee, but he did not wish anyone to know about it. He was teaching his disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death the Son of Man will rise.” But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him. They came to Capernaum and, once inside the

house, he began to ask them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they remained silent. For they had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest. Then he sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.” Taking a child, he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it, he said to them, “Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me.” (Mark 9:30-37)

The Cross I remember reading one scholar (whose field was the writings of Plato) who declared that the two most influential persons in history were Socrates and Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came *first* in influence (with Socrates being the father of – what we might call – Western rational argumentation). I once was part of a guided tour of Jewish religious sites in Jerusalem, led by a Jewish guide. At one point he said casually that Jesus Christ had an incredible influence on the world. While Napoleon Bonaparte was scarcely a truly religious man

(though Metternich once said he was a Catholic by something like conviction), he regarded Jesus Christ as absolutely incomparable in the hold he had on countless human *hearts* across the ages. This he said during his final exile on St Helena. This power to inspire such *love*, thought Bonaparte, proved his divinity. Such a remark shows the *standing in history* of the Man of Nazareth. No one before him equalled his influence –

Abraham? Moses? David? Elijah? Isaiah? No. Though Confucius, Buddha, Zoroaster, Mahomet and others have had vast followings, none have equalled that of Jesus Christ. Of course, none have matched his exalted personal claims and the assent to them that he has commanded. None have equalled the personal love for himself that he has inspired and the effect of this love on the lives of people. But let us look at Christ's life and the decisions which marked them, especially one. Very deliberately, he *chose to die*. By that I mean that he very deliberately took steps which he knew would involve his death. When the appointed hour came he stepped forward (when he need not have) to bear witness to the truth, knowing it would mean his death. He took the

road to Jerusalem (when he need not have) in order to bear witness before the highest religious authorities of the nation, and *so embraced his death*. He had the power freely to lay down his life and freely to take it up. Why did he *choose* to lay it down? It was the will of his heavenly Father of course, but such a course seemed inexplicable to his disciples. *Jesus and his disciples left from there and began a journey through Galilee, but he did not wish anyone to know about it. He was teaching his disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death the Son of Man will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him.*

There is a remote parallel to this choice in Socrates' choosing not to flee from Greece but to accept the sentence of execution (by suicide), and his reasons for this course are explained in Plato's account. But there is little parallel in respect to the *purpose* of this choice. Christ's acceptance of his foreseen sentence of death, as Christian dogma declares, had an utterly unique purpose. It was to

atone for the sin of the world and to open for mankind a share in the divine life which was lost at the beginning. His freely-chosen laying down of his life saved the world from its sin. He freely took it up again to offer to mankind a share in his risen life – which meant the Gift of the Spirit of God. His death by crucifixion (far more horrible and shameful than Socrates' drinking the poison) was the greatest of his great acts. But there was a second unique result. It also transformed the meaning and possibilities of *suffering*, that bugbear for all religion and theism. Philosopher after philosopher has pointed to suffering as the clinching argument against the proposition that there is a truly good, all-powerful and wise Creator and Sustainer of the world. How could there be, with the world being such a poor job? It is totally pathetic – one would have to expect much better of the Being set forth for belief by Christian dogma. Indeed, in one of his articles the British anthropologist of primal religions, Evans-Pritchard, declares that the key to understanding such religions is to ask how it answers the problem of evil and suffering. Ultimately it may not be possible fully to understand *why* an all-good and all-powerful Creator allows what is evil

and damaging, but the Christian Revelation shows what God *did* about it. He sent his Son to endure this suffering and evil, and to draw wondrous good out of it. That good is essentially sanctity – sanctity for the individual, and sanctity for the world. But the point here is that all who approach Jesus Christ, believe in him and choose to follow him, may share in his *victory* over suffering and death. Not that they will be enabled to *avoid* suffering. Not at all. But by suffering *in union with Jesus* they will (as St Paul puts it) fill up what remains in Christ's sufferings (Colossians 1: 24) and so contribute to the advancement of the redemption wrought by those very sufferings. By suffering and dying with Christ we share in his resurrection and collaborate with him in the redemption of the world. Suffering is thus rendered resplendent.

To get this point into our heads and our hearts and to understand that it is of the essence of the Christian religion requires a special grace, and the free acceptance of that grace. Jesus Christ had to suffer and die and freely so, if he was to fulfil the divine plan of the world's redemption. Further, it is the divine plan of redemption and

sanctification that if we wish to be his disciples – and this is, from the foundation of the world, God’s plan for us – we too must take up our cross and follow in his footsteps. That is the path to a share in the joy of Jesus Christ, which is the true fulfilment of the natural desire for happiness implanted in us by our Creator. What to *do* about this? We must *pray for the grace to see* it, pray for the grace to *do* it, and then *choose to act* on it.



Wednesday of the Seventh Week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: James 4: 13-17; Psalm 48; Mark 9:38-40

John said to Jesus, Teacher, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us. Do not stop him, Jesus said. No-one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment speak ill of me, for whoever is not against us is for us. (Mark 9:38-40)

Whoever is not against us is for us. During our Lord's passion, he was mocked and ill-treated by the common soldiers. But let us notice the *centurion* who organized and supervised the practicalities of Christ's execution. While the procurator Pilate decreed his execution, we read of the *centurion* being at Golgotha. While Pilate seemed hesitant and nonplussed before the all-holy Jesus, the *centurion* expressed profound admiration for the One who had just expired on the cross (Matthew 27:54). This may have been the result not only of his having witnessed the trembling of the earth at Christ's death, but the manner and high *character* of Jesus as the military cortege made its way to the place of crucifixion and as he hung dying. On this brief journey Christ seems to have converted Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21) – presumably it was the centurion who commandeered Simon for this service and perhaps he noticed Christ's influence on his new helper. At the last, the centurion saw in Jesus a profoundly good and religious man – and he may even have gained a fleeting glimpse of his divinity ("Truly this was the/a son of God"). Christ's execution (ostensibly, perhaps, for sedition and serious disturbance) was a Roman act and it

forebode the Roman persecutions to come. But we notice that in the Gospels the references to the *Romans* are not overtly hostile. Pilate is portrayed more as pathetic than envious, implacable and brutal – which is how the leaders of the Temple aristocracy are presented. We remember how Christ highly praised the faith of one *centurion* and placed it ahead of the generality of Israel (Matthew 8:10). We notice too that when it comes to the expansion of the Church as narrated in the *Acts of the Apostles*, Roman officials are presented in a fairly favourable light. After all, Paul did not hesitate to appeal to *Caesar*, and during his journey to Rome he was well treated by the centurion in charge of him. I wonder if this is not an instance of a spirit of acceptance of those not formally against them, which Christ instilled in his disciples. *No-one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment speak ill of me, for whoever is not against us is for us.* In our Gospel today (Mark 9:38-40) our Lord inculcates a readiness see good where possible, and not to be prone to regard the other negatively.

When Paul visited Athens – a visit due to show poor results – he manifested a positive attitude to the idolatry he encountered, although this may in part have been a matter of strategy. He declared before the Areopagus that “in every way you are very religious” – he saw in the ubiquitous idols a basis for introducing them to the God whom they did not know (Acts 17: 22-31). Perhaps in all this Paul remembered his own case, in that he himself had changed instantly when confronted by Christ himself. It indicated that his conscience had been truly *for* God, though profoundly and utterly mistaken. *Whoever is not against us is for us.* Looking further ahead in Christian history, we notice this striking point that the scholars and educators of the Christian religion looked benignly on pagan Greek and Roman literature and its great writers. The monks of East and West and in the early (so-called) Dark Ages were assiduous in copying and preserving Classical literature. I am not sure that this characterized typical Jewish religious culture so quickly. The monks perceived that much of excellent classical literature was not formally *against* the faith, so it was accepted by them as broadly being *for* it. We are reminded of what Cardinal Newman

said of Classical literature: “If then the power of speech is a gift as great as any that can be named,—if the origin of language is by many philosophers even considered to be nothing short of divine,—if by means of words the secrets of the heart are brought to light, pain of soul is relieved, hidden grief is carried off, sympathy conveyed, counsel imparted, experience recorded, and wisdom perpetuated,—if by great authors the many are drawn up into unity, national character is fixed, a people speaks, the past and the future, the East and the West are brought into communication with each other,—if such men are, in a word, the spokesmen and prophets of the human family,—it will not answer to make light of Literature or to neglect its study; rather we may be sure that, in proportion as we master it in whatever language, and imbibe its spirit, we shall ourselves become in our own measure the ministers of like benefits to others, be they many or few, be they in the obscurer or the more distinguished walks of life,—who are united to us by social ties, and are within the sphere of our personal influence” (*The Idea of a University*, Part II — University Subjects, II — Literature, no. 10). *Whoever is not against us is for us.*

Our Lord's teaching and spirit in all of this is a manifestation of the richness of God's mercy. *What I want is mercy, not sacrifice.* When the prodigal son returned to his father, full of faults and misdeeds, his father rushed out to embrace him. He knew his faults – he told his elder son that the younger son had been *dead* (but was now alive) – but he looked positively and mercifully upon him. We must be clear-eyed when it comes to error and moral degradation, but nature did not emerge from the Fall *utterly* depraved. That was a real mistake of the Protestant Reformation. Nature remains good, but seriously wounded. Sin entered the world and with it death, but the Spirit of God still hovers over the waters. Most importantly, the Good News is that the world has a Redeemer and by his gift the Spirit of God is at work wishing to sanctify us all.



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Scripture today: James 5:1-6; Psalm 48; Mark 9:41-50

Jesus said to his disciples: I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward. And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to

sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other. (Mark 9:41-50)

God and Sin There are great numbers who think that only natural laws and forces operate in the world – such a view of things is commonly called *naturalism* (as in, *observable* nature). Our changing universe is the product simply of natural laws, involving the observable patterns of nature’s activity. In the final analysis this is a *belief* in the light of which *all* of reality is interpreted. Of course, the theist will oppose this assumption and will assert that “natural” laws are in reality

secondary causes sustained by the First (abiding) Cause. But this modern shift towards denying any possible supernatural agency in accounting for the world's changes and happenings involves something deeper. It also denies the very existence of the supernatural. A great number of contemporary philosophers would happily reject 'supernatural' entities. For thinkers such as John Dewey, Ernest Nagel, Sidney Hook and Roy Wood Sellars, observable nature is the *only* reality. There is no such thing as a 'supernatural' – so of course there is no *God*, for example. This is a further reason why the scientific method is to be used to investigate all reality, including the human spirit. They would have it that “science” is the one route to important truths about the human person. There is nothing but natural elements, principles, and relations of the kind studied by the natural sciences, i.e., those disciplines which study our environment by such methods as *mathematical* modelling. So it is that the American analytic philosopher W. V. Quine described naturalism as the position that there is no higher tribunal for *truth* than natural science itself. In sum, the naturalist tendency is to look upon “nature” as the one original and

fundamental source of all that exists, and to attempt to explain everything in terms of nature – and so God is “dead” and absent. We could also say that this is the *tendency* of the masses in a secular society. So, “Religion” is separated from practical life. This *metaphysical naturalism* means that all properties related to *consciousness and the mind* are reducible to, or supervene upon, observable nature. This has implications also for the perception of an objective moral law. If God is absent, even more rarely is *sin* mentioned – people express remorse for misdemeanours, but there is never a mention of *sin*. All this is a function of the absence of God.

In a word, what matters is *this world* and success in it – mishaps are to be avoided, and temporal opportunities seized. The absoluteness of moral obligation is in the last analysis reduced to utility. It is *useful* and *advantageous* in this life to be moral. But of course, this is not the true situation. The root problem would seem to be that there has been for a long time a widespread sense that *God* just does not matter much, nor therefore does *sin*. This is an assumption, but fuelled by a culpable

disposition of the *will*, an implicit *desire* that it be so. It is for this reason, I suppose, that Pope Pius XII declared that “Perhaps the greatest sin in the world today is that men have begun to lose the sense of sin” (26th October 1946). The loss of the sense of sin is itself seriously *sinful* – it is due to moral fault. What is the remedy for this? There are many, but let us consider one. It relates to the universality of the sense of moral obligation. All know that good must be done and evil avoided. Further, all know that in general one may not murder or steal or ruin another’s reputation or covet with intent another’s wife and property – although these acts may be *defined* variously. That is to say, there is a point at which moral obligation is absolute: one is absolutely obliged to act in a certain way, yet one is not *compelled* to do so. One is free, yet one has the sense that ultimately there will be consequences for obedience or disobedience. So real is the moral law that one cannot but notice how, in the daily news, reports are filled with the ethical dimension of life. Misdemeanour, crime and wrongdoing is the staple of press, radio and television – indeed of drama and fiction. If a person does wrong, and if his conscience is alive and well, his self-

condemnation can be so great that nothing else compares with it in importance. All this gives us the clue to a great fact, that tangible reality subject to empirical testing is not the only reality. The moral order with its absolute obligation is just as real as is, say, economic need or material satisfaction. It is just as real as my house, my car or the people with whom I live and relate with each day. It is just as real as the climate, and the benefits and grave inconveniences which the climate can bring. I disregard the moral law to my peril. It is critical that one see the absoluteness of moral obligation, and then perceive its real implications.

The Source of this vast and absolute moral reality is the Lawgiver and Judge we know to be God. It is thus that we can come to a natural sense of God and of personal sin. With this natural sense in place, we shall more easily accept and live in the light of our Lord's insistent teaching on the eternal consequences of unrepented serious sin. In our Gospel today (Mark 9:41-50) our Lord is clear: *if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be*

better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. Hell is very real, and the way to hell is serious, unrepented sin: if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'. Let us turn to God and his mercy, and resolve never to spurn his commandments.



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Scripture today: James 5:9-12; Psalm 102; Mark 10:1-12

Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them. Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” “What did Moses command you?” he replied. They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.” “It was because

your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,” Jesus replied. “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.” (Mark 10:1-2)

Marriage I remember reading an article by an acquaintance of mine – a professor of philosophy in a secular university – in which he observed in passing that philosophical reflection alone will not bring a person to belief in God. By *belief* he meant a *firm conviction* of the existence of God as he is commonly understood by us. It reminded me of the position expressed by John Henry Newman in his early Evangelical sermons of the mid-1820s. He considered that mere philosophical

reflection on, say, the “design” of the universe will not bring a person to belief in God (as we know him to be). At that point he believed that in some sense a prior acceptance of Revelation is needed if reflection on creation is to have this result. He made this point in the context of his own day when the so-called Argument from Design was the principal argument for theism (as expressed in, for example, Paley’s works). Newman later refined his position somewhat. In, for instance, his *Grammar of Assent*, he allowed that it is obvious to the natural reason that the world is *ordered* – and this requires an Orderer. But to say that it obviously has a *design* is another matter. He was clearly using the term “design”, not as meaning “order”, but as meaning the divine *intent* or *purpose* of the order in the world. So the later Newman distinguished between the world’s order and its design, even though the word “design” can mean merely “order”. He was saying that the world has a manifest divinely established *order*, but its divinely intended *design* or purpose is not manifest. It is on the basis of the world’s order that we can argue to a divine Orderer (but perhaps not one that is *infinite*, and therefore “God”). But God’s design in ordering and

guiding the world is beyond the reach of natural reason. Be all that as it may in ultimate terms, we surely know not only the fact of order in the world, but *to a point* the design of many of its components (which Newman would not deny). For instance, teeth are *ordered*, and their order is obviously *designed* by God *for eating* (and for other purposes too). However, Newman's point is very important. While we can see the order in things, what many things in this ordered world are *designed* for may not be at all clear to sinful man – and marriage is perhaps a case in point. For instance, from unassisted reason *alone* it may not be at all clear that “marriage” is *designed* by God (the Orderer of man and his nature) to be indissoluble.

This is to say that in discerning the meaning and purpose of dimensions of his nature (so important for his happiness), man is at a great advantage if he assents to divine revelation. God has revealed many things about himself, *and also* about his design in creating man and the world in the way he did. God has revealed that he is one – and this is a very great advance in man's knowledge of the unseen

world. God is one in being. There is no other *God* than he, and he created and sustains all other things be they seen or unseen. He is the Ruler and Lord of all – his Providence brings all things to the end he has in mind. Precisely because there is but one Creator, we can see common patterns in all of creation. This fact may suggest (as a natural revelation) elements of God’s plan or intent in structuring his creation as he did. But there is a supernatural revelation about God coming from Jesus Christ, far beyond the capacity of human reason to attain. While being one in being, God is a communion of *persons*, three divine Persons in fact – all united in love and in their oneness of being. Now, for the one alert to it, this basic feature of the divine being is embedded and reflected in various degrees in the things he has made. Created things reflect the divine nature to a point, and most especially when it comes to the crown of the visible universe which is man. Man in his order and structure shows forth God’s design (or intent) that he, man, reflect the communion which is at the heart of God. Man’s structure and nature is geared inextricably towards a communion of persons. That is the design of God for man as he has ordered him. Man

was made not for solitude but for love and an abiding communion. One of the most obvious teachings of the first chapter of Genesis is that there is but one God who is the creator of all and that he made man in his own image and likeness (1:26). When it comes to the next chapter, it is very plain that man was made not to be alone but in *communion* with others of his own kind, indeed with *another* of his own kind who was made of his own substance. The inspired author presents us with a direct result of man being made male and female: *a man cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh*. The implication of this is that God created man with a certain *order* (as male and female), and his *design* for man in giving him this order was that he cling to his wife who is of his own kind, and that they become *absolutely one*.

Our Lord confirms this and brings out the original divine intent with absolute clarity. *Jesus replied. "At the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has*

joined together, let man not separate.” God created man in his own image and likeness. And what is God like? Christ reveals that he is a communion of divine persons. In creating man, he made him male and female. What was his intent or design here? It was that he *be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh*. Christ gives this further emphasis: *So they are no longer two, but one*. They are one by the natural law of their being and creation, reflecting the will of the Creator. In turn, God has used marriage to be a sign of the special relationship he intends to establish between himself and us. But that is a further matter – here our point is that marriage is *designed* to be indissoluble.



Saturday of the Seventh Week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: James 5:13-20; Psalm 140; Mark 10:13-16

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)

Being Childlike There is an unfathomable variety in the created order, be it the seen or unseen world. God has effortlessly brought into being and sustained the myriads of angelic beings in their dazzling array of species and choirs. The very thought of this helps us gain a glimmer of appreciation of God's might, holiness and beauty. This angelic world has been cleaved asunder by deliberate sin, with the result that there is now not only the host that stands before God singing his praises and doing his will. There are also the hordes of hate-filled demons who are doomed yet intent on wrecking all things that have come from God's hand. Satan (Lucifer) was one of the highest angels (Ezekiel 28:14), indeed it is not impossible that he was the highest. Lucifer—and all the angels—were called to be continually in God's presence. They had knowledge of the glory of God. They had no excuse for rebelling against him. They clearly saw that rebellion was the utmost evil and that they were thus separating themselves from communion with God forever. Having chosen that course, repentance is impossible to them, and their special object now is the ruination of the second great order of God's creation, man and his world. *Our*

world, though lower than the angelic world on the scale of what we may call ontological perfection, is the object of God's special predilection. For God himself has become man and united himself to us all in this extraordinary way. He did not become an angel. There is some dispute among the great Christian thinkers as to whether the Incarnation was in the first instance God's *response to man's sin*, or whether it lay at the *basis of God's creation* of man and his world. Blessed Duns Scotus maintained that God would have become man whether or not man had sinned. The Incarnation was not dependent on any (bad) act of man. If this is so (which I believe more likely) then we can take it a step further. Man and the world were created with Christ as the grand *Archetype*. God created the world through his Word, *also* in the sense that the Incarnate Word was the primordial *Image* in the light of which the created visible order was brought into being. Thus, while Jesus is the Image of the unseen God, the world is *made in his image*. Thus he "is the image of the invisible God" *and* "the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created" (Colossians 1: 15). Jesus Christ is not only man's Redeemer

from sin and his source of sanctification. He is the basic *Archetype* of all.

This having been said, let us turn to our Gospel passage today in which our Lord holds up the image of the little child. He teaches us that *anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it*. Obviously, our Lord could not have meant that we are to imitate “a little child” in just any sense. A child is immature and often very selfish. Some little children are a cause of immense concern and sorrow to their parents or guardians. Our Lord means us to contemplate certain *good* features of the “little child” and imitate those features in an exemplary fashion. He would surely have been thinking of, let us say, the spirit of dependence, trust and abandonment to, say, the person and teaching of his or her parent. We are to be open to God and Christ with these good and winning qualities which we see in many little children. Putting it more deeply, we are to be truly *filial* in our attitude to God, just as a “little child” manifests at least some of this. But I would like to take our thoughts to what has been said above. Jesus

Christ is the Archetype and Exemplar of all creation. For instance, he taught us the Beatitudes – *he*, though, is the Exemplar of these. So too is *he* the Archetype and Exemplar of what it means to be “a little child”. There are a few obvious senses in which this is so. Firstly, he is the only-begotten *Son* of the Father. He is the Father’s Child from all eternity, equal to the Father in every respect pertaining to his divine being. His eternity was filial in character, and his earthly life was lived out in filial obedience to his heavenly Father. This was so all his life, including in his childhood. This is another sense in which Jesus is the Exemplar of what it means to be “a little child”. If ever there was a “little child” who is the model for all mankind in receiving the Kingdom of God, it is the Child Jesus. We read in the Gospel of St Luke that when Mary and Joseph found the Child Jesus in the Temple after their three days of searching, he replied to them by saying that they ought to have known that he was about his Father’s affairs (or in the house of his Father). His primary life was as a “little child” before his heavenly Father. But then we read that he returned to Nazareth with them and was subject to their parental authority. He was an utterly

admirable child in every respect. This is the foundation for the commendable devotion to the Child Jesus – an instance being devotion to the Infant of Prague.

I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. Of course, our Lord said this in the context of his correction of his disciples' action keeping the children from him (out of concern for him). The children loved to be with him, especially after they had been brought to him. Our Lord was holding up before his disciples the attitude of a *child* to *him*, in whom subsisted God's reign in all its fullness. But for our part, let us take it further, and look to the attitude of Christ to his heavenly Father, and to Christ when he was a human child. Imagine his attitude to God and his will, God and his dominion. We must endeavour to receive "the kingdom of God" – his reign, his dominion, his will – as did Christ.



Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):19-20 The Lord became my protector. He brought me out to a place of freedom; he saved me because he delighted in me.

Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 17:17-24; Psalm 29;

Galatians 1:11-19; Luke 7:11-17

Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out — the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the

Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, Do not weep. Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, Young man, I say to you, get up! The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. A great prophet has appeared among us, they said. God has come to help his people. (Luke 7:11-17)

Mercy It is normal in the history of nations and cultures for a society to have its religion. During the last few centuries there has been the anomaly in Western culture of a growing rejection of religion from the public life of society. This is due to its embrace of secularism. But normally, religion develops with a society as an aspect of its life. One of the most striking historical events was the rise of the Christian Religion within the Roman Empire. It was not indigenous to the Roman Empire, and it was rejected by the leaders of the small out-of-the-way nation where it began: the chosen people of Israel. From the first, it was the object of persecution. It underwent this persecution for

three centuries of valiant witness to Christ before being accepted as the official religion of the empire. Whether this *official* state position was a good thing for it in the long run is a further question, but the point here is that its pathway was one of *persecution* – and its divine Founder made it clear that this would indeed be the destiny of the community of his disciples. The image Jesus Christ set before the infant Church as the path to life and glory was that of the Cross. Many have looked on the emergence of the Christian Religion in classical Roman society as an iconic parable to illustrate this, and have seen its apparent success amid long persecution as a perennial reminder of the power of divine grace. It was not the fruit of arms and temporal means. Trust was not to be placed in chariots but in God. Now, this singular pattern was about to be repeated, for Christianity “triumphed” (as we might put it) at the threshold of the crumbling of its great persecutor. Indeed, Newman in some of his writings saw the successful Barbarian attack on the Roman Empire as a Judgment on its long persecution of the Religion of Jesus Christ. In any case, the hordes attacked and attacked. They pillaged and plundered across the Western Empire and

on the great city of Rome itself. The “Dark Ages” had begun and were destined to continue for at least three centuries. The Catholic Church entered a new period of grave persecution and immense difficulty coming from the Vandals, the Huns, the Germanic tribes, the Norsemen. But what happened? The Church’s intrepid witness kept up, and they took it to their new persecutors and won the day. Christian Europe was gradually born – we may take it as signalled with the coronation of Charlemagne by the Pope in 800. *But it was amid persecution.*

What is the point being made here? It is that whatever be the age we must expect contradiction, difficulty, seeming overwhelming odds – in a word, the *Cross*. There will be periods of apparent peace and rest, but before it is noticed very dark clouds will have filled the sky. Constantine proclaimed the Christian Religion, but very soon there was Arius and the whole of the fourth century was filled with intense battles against absolute heresy as to the person of Jesus Christ. There will be difficulties from within and from without. This is to be the

pattern and it is not of God's making but of fallen man's. Yes, in a sense the Church "triumphed" over the hordes of the Dark Ages and brought about Christian Europe – we may say that the dominance of Pope Innocent III was an image of this "success" of the mediaeval period. But it too contained immense and appalling difficulties. The difficulties of the papacy during the tenth century are almost incredible, and more was to come from within and from without. Eastern Orthodoxy cleaved from Western Catholicism, and Islam began to pound at Christendom. The terrible break-up of Western Christianity arrived and was effected in the sixteenth century, and so the story goes on. In every age, the Church founded by Christ is called to be valiant in its individual members day by day, knowing full well that difficulty is not only present but ahead. The Church's children are called to be faithful to Jesus Christ in their lives and witness, knowing that the menacing of evil is not all that there is to the story of man. God is all-powerful and he is merciful. His power is shown in his mercy, and this is the real dynamic behind the phenomena of history. God's almighty and merciful providence embraces all, and glory follows the cross. As

Pope Benedict XVI often pointed out, another anti-Christian dictatorship has arrived in the midst of so-called Christian societies that have to a fair extent lost their soul. It is the dictatorship of a secular relativism which rejects objective morality grounded in nature and fulfilled in Revelation. That which is right is that which suits *me* and the *majority*. So we had a previously very Catholic country (Ireland) voting in a referendum (no less) to recognize same-sex marriage. As said the Holy See's Secretary of State at the time, it was a defeat for humanity. A great challenge lies ahead. It is to bear valiant witness to Christ *amid persecution and difficulty*.

All this brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 7:11-17). The scene is of a funeral procession, in which *a dead person was being carried out — the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her.* Things might look dead or at least dying, and for those who see clearly the situation may be a cause of weeping and sorrow. But there is a great Light ahead, and it is constituted by the presence of Jesus Christ. *When the Lord saw her, his*

heart went out to her and he said, Do not weep. Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, Young man, I say to you, get up! The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. Christ our God and Brother may not do for us what he did then, but if we resolve to bear witness to him he will act with power and mercy when his time comes. He is the revelation of the divine mercy. So then, now I begin!



Monday of the Eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):19-20 The Lord became my protector. He brought me out to a place of freedom; he saved me because he delighted in me.

Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 1:3-9; Psalm 110; Mark 10:17-27

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honour your father and your

mother.” He replied and said to him, “Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, “You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” At that statement, his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!” The disciples were amazed at his words. So Jesus again said to them in reply, “Children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.” They were exceedingly astonished and said among themselves, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For men it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God.” (Mark 10:17-27)

Life Eternal

Animals and insects fear attacks on their life and they themselves attack the life of other living things. The impulse for life is universal among living things, and this instinct for life is present more

powerfully in man. We love to live and the threat to life causes terror unless it is counterbalanced by a more dominant good. Life is man's most treasured possession – it is a gift which came to him at his conception, and experience will tell him that it can easily be lost. In any case, he knows (as against other living things that do not know) that he will most certainly die. Life is his greatest possession, and sooner or later this will be taken away from him. He is the one living thing in the universe who knows he will die. It is a fundamental fact, and he has to take account of it. Instinctively, he fears this because life is a precious treasure. The question he must face is, what might happen to him when he dies? Will his death be the end, or will it be a new beginning to life – will there be an Afterlife, in other words? Barring some clear news from the Unseen world, how can he get some light on this? Well, to begin with, man has a strange, persistent and virtually universal sense that he will continue in some way after death. This is evident in so many religious beliefs, myths and rituals. He has the sense that he is not just a material object which dissolves into its basic material elements which are then absorbed into the material processes of the

world. He is also spiritual. There is an element in him, his inner thinking Self, which is not reducible to his material body which is part of him during this life. His inner Self will endure. Thus it is that he senses there will not be a total annihilation at his death. Very importantly, in his inner Self he knows not merely himself and the world as plain objects, but he knows too the vast fact of moral obligation. He *should* do certain things in a certain way. He *should* make certain choices, even though he is free not to. He has the sense that if he *does* what he should do he will be rewarded somehow, and if he does *not* do what he should do he will be punished. There is moral obligation and there is retribution. So it is that he has the vague sense, reflected in very many religions, myths and rituals, that after this life there will be some kind of retribution for the way he has chosen to live. It is imperative that we live morally.

These are the facts of life, the phenomena that are open before the gaze of the generality of men and women who have a normal preparedness for it. In the history of mankind the normal thing is to

believe that there is a God (or gods), and that in some sense we shall have to answer to him in this life and in the next. But there is this that we also are aware, or should be aware, that we are guilty of wrongdoing in his sight – be it in thought, word or deed. Conscience tells us that we are guilty before him, which is to say that we are sinners and not deserving of a lot of commendation. So the question of what will happen after death is a critical one. If there is retribution after death (which the experience of conscience suggests to us) then we have reason to be anxious. The great question, then, is this: What must I do to attain happiness in the Afterlife? How can I gain life in abundance, happiness to the full beyond this life that certainly lacks this? This question can be understood in different terms. It can be a question about the answer to life's evil and suffering. Buddhism may be seen as a quest for the way out of suffering and evil. The goal is Nirvana or Enlightenment. It involves the liberation from Desire and is not formally theistic. The proposition of a God is not to the purpose in its scheme. Whether it does meet its own goal of true happiness is another matter, for man is surely made for an interpersonal love, a *loving union*

with Another, that is good and holy. But the point here is that the very human question of what I must do to gain life eternal is a most basic one, and is fraught with the greatest significance. I shall assuredly die – what then? That is the question. I must do all I can to ensure that I attain happiness hereafter, and it would seem that the endeavour to lead a morally good life is an inescapable requirement. All this brings us to our wonderful Gospel passage today (Mark 10:17-27), in which the Saviour of the world is asked this very question by one he looked on with love. He loved his questioner because of that man's moral goodness. He had kept God's commandments. What our Lord said confirmed the sense of man in his thinking about life after death. If you wish to attain life eternal, keep God's commandments. So, the most basic thing of all to do in life if we have any common sense at all, is to be good by doing what God commands.

But then our Lord raises the stakes to a new level. He reminds his questioner and all of us who treasure his words that we have a natural desire and *end* to seek not just a broad and *average* moral

goodness, but the *perfection* of the moral life. Our nature suggests to us a call to moral perfection, one within which will be found our true and best happiness. We are called to aim high in the moral life and to do our duty very, very well. Do we *want* this? – that is the problem. All too often, all too many people do *not* want this. We ought ask for the help of God to want it, and his help to see clearly how it is to be attained. It is to be attained by the close following of Jesus Christ – being his disciple, no less. The man who approached our Lord was a good man, but it was this that was lacking. When he was invited to come after Jesus he refused. How tragic!



Tuesday of the Eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):19-20 The Lord became my protector. He brought me out to a place of freedom; he saved me because he delighted in me.

Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 1:10-16; Psalm 97; Mark 10:28-31

Peter said to Jesus, We have left everything to follow you! I tell you the truth, Jesus replied, no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields— and with them, persecutions) and

in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. (Mark 10: 28-31)

A Hundredfold Most would agree that the goal of life is to be happy and not unhappy. One would expect, then, that parents would strive to help their children to know what it is to be happy in life, and how to attain it. One obvious problem in a proposition such as this is that great numbers of parents themselves do not really know how happiness is to be attained — and for this simple reason that they do not know in what it is that happiness consists. The words of Thomas at the Last Supper are apposite in the matter of happiness, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way there?” So the basic question is, In what does true happiness consist? Great numbers would *assume* that happiness consists in doing well economically, in being well regarded and successful, in having plenty of ease and freedom from work, in being physically healthy — and many other temporal blessings besides. These goals will bring a measure of happiness. Having attained a *certain measure* of happiness, many do

not bother with the deeper question which is, In what consists *great and enduring* happiness? Obviously, happiness in this life cannot consist in the absence of difficulty and pain because it is manifestly impossible that difficulty and pain be banished from life. The world changes, and this vast movement of things cannot be ordered to the convenience of an individual, a group, a nation. The lack of fit between the individual and his physical and social environment will mean that, in a certain sense, the words of Christ will apply to all: “in the world you will have trouble” (16:33). They will, of course, apply supremely to Christ’s closest disciples who model their lives on him whose path led to the Cross. But there is this to be noticed. There are many cases of persons who in the midst of pain and difficulty are very happy — and all recognize that this is a great achievement. If there is to be true happiness in life, it has to be a happiness that is possible in the midst of difficulty and pain. So, the question of life is, How to attain true happiness in the midst of pain and suffering? This in turn involves the question, in what does happiness consist?

Answering the question abstractly and philosophically, we could hazard an answer to this by saying that, theoretically, our truest happiness will come by steadfastly living in the truth, even though the doing of this will be costly. But this is theoretical, and scarcely likely to fill and warm the heart. Jesus Christ gives us the divine path to human happiness. The deepest happiness consists in being united to him, and this will come in the following of him. He says to us, trust me on this! Leave everything — in terms of the attachments of your heart — and come! Follow me! Our Gospel today comes after the episode of the wealthy man who had eagerly come to our Lord asking what more need he do to gain eternal life (Mark 10:17). Our Lord looked on him with love and solemnly told him that the one thing he lacked was this: sell all, leave all, give it to the poor, and follow me. The man went off sad. Presumably a certain sadness remained with him for the rest of his life. He had, in effect, been told by our Lord in what his greatest fulfilment would consist, and therefore his deepest happiness. Following his refusal, he would never have attained the happiness that could have been his. He had chosen to seek his

happiness in other things as well — in his case, in his wealth. His truest happiness consisted in choosing and following Jesus Christ as the Lord of his life. This is the context of our passage today (Mark 10: 28-31), which opens with Peter’s profession that “we have left all and have followed you.” The Apostles had done what the rich man refused to do. At this our Lord solemnly assured them that the deepest happiness will be theirs: *“Jesus replied, no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields— and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life”* (Mark 10: 28-31). If we choose Christ and resolutely strive to make him the central choice in all our choices, the love of our heart in all that we do, then — together with sufferings (“persecutions”) — we shall share in the joy that Christ gives to his friends. The love of Christ, as present in the following of him, is the key to happiness.

Let every disciple of Christ be confident in the divine promise that the following of him is the path to happiness. But it will be the happiness of one who shares in the Cross of his Lord. He will receive *“a hundred times as much in this present age, together with persecutions ... and in the age to come, eternal life.”* So every day let us offer all our thoughts, words, joys and sufferings to God, striving to do his will in union with Christ, knowing that by doing this we are contributing in the greatest way possible to the happiness of the world.



Wednesday of the Eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):19-20 The Lord became my protector. He brought me out to a place of freedom; he saved me because he delighted in me.

Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 1:18-25; Psalm 147; Mark 10:32-45

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. We are going up to Jerusalem, he said, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the

Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise. Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. Teacher, they said, we want you to do for us whatever we ask. What do you want me to do for you? he asked. They replied, Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory. You don't know what you are asking, Jesus said. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with? We can, they answered. Jesus said to them, You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared. When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man

did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:32-45)

The Divine Strategy One of the remarkable stories in history is that of Mahomet's rise from utter obscurity, his religious experiences, his sense of special calling, his early reversals, his flight from Mecca to Medina, and then his gradual ascendancy to complete victory. He won out not only in the spread of the new religion he proclaimed, but also politically. He defeated his enemies politically and militarily, and this, as was natural, powerfully aided in his defeat of competing religions in the region. Mahomet beat his opponents at their own game. This is not to deny the effect of the very superiority and attraction of the new religion over the Arabian polytheism it conquered. It set the stage for a remarkable turn in history as the Muslim armies overran region after region bringing to those defeated peoples the imposition of Islam. When one stands back and looks at the rise of Islam and its astonishing spread, one can understand the Islamic claim that it could not have had such success had it not been the religion intended and

revealed by God. However, granted the means which came to hand and which were taken by Mahomet and his followers, it is quite understandable that Islam spread so rapidly. There is no mystery to it. The strategy for spread and for victory was unashamedly political, military and economic — together with the proclamation of the religion. Against the claim that the great success of Islam had to be supernatural in its cause, it is not hard to make the counter suggestion that it was manifestly natural in its causes. Other spectacular phenomena are also to be noticed in history, such as the extraordinary success of Alexander the Great some eight hundred years before. He thought that the gods had vindicated him and that they were bearing him along. It seems that he came to think he was divine. His success, though, was due to his native brilliance, his military genius, his armies and many other factors of the natural order. Now, why do I mention the rise of a figure such as Mahomet and the strategies he employed to bring his religion to his people and beyond?

It is always helpful, when considering one thing, to set it against another that is very different. Its distinctive characteristics can be more easily noticed and appreciated. In our Gospel today we read that “*They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid.*” Ever since the early stages of his public ministry, our Lord had faced mounting hostility and opposition from — not all, but — the dominant elements of the ruling class. To an increasing extent, an observer might have said that he was embattled. They were out to get him, yet they were baffled as to how this was to be done. Whenever there was any direct confrontation, Jesus Christ routed them in debate and in every other sense. He showed that he had the power to overcome them completely — even, had he chosen, by very force. But he never did use such *natural* means. On the contrary, he eluded capture, escaped their grasp in dramatic moments, and never developed a strategy for victory based on natural brilliance. His plan was completely different. It was to attain the victory intended by God precisely by means of defeat. In our Gospel today (Mark 10: 32-45) he

was making his way resolutely to Jerusalem where, the disciples knew, all that could be expected is death. They were astonished. Some were filled with fear. What was the sense in what their Master was doing? *“Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. We are going up to Jerusalem, he said, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”* As he would soon say to James and John, he had a cup to drink, a baptism ahead. This was the way, the divine strategy for gaining the glory of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God was coming in power, and the means for this was the direct opposite of *worldly* strategy. The divine strategy was to bear witness to the truth amid *suffering*.

Let us place ourselves with James and John and present ourselves to Jesus. Let us ask him, not for first places by his side in glory, but for the great grace of being able every day to drink his cup,

and to be baptized with his baptism of suffering and bearing the cross. That is the strategy for true success. We must live in union with Jesus Christ as he carries his cross along the road to Calvary. If we do this — if we do the will of God every day after the example of Jesus Christ and in union with him — then we shall share in his glory. This must be our strategy in life. We must not trust in chariots.

Thursday of the Eighth Week in Ordinary Time

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Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 2:2-5.9-12; Psalm 99; Mark 10:46-52

Then Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. As they were leaving the city, together with a large crowd, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, Son of David, have mercy on me! Jesus stopped and said, Call him. So they called to the blind man, Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you. Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. What do you want me to do for you? Jesus asked him. The blind man said, Rabbi, I want to see. Go, said Jesus, your faith has healed you. Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. (Mark 10:46-52)

Persistent Prayer A case could be made for thinking that the simplest parts of the entire Scriptures are the Gospels. They are direct and concrete and easy to imagine, even if parts of our Lord's teaching therein are difficult – not to follow, but – to understand. For instance,

the Beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of St Matthew are not difficult to follow, but in certain respects are somewhat difficult to understand. Our Lord's doctrine on the Eucharist in chapter 6 of St John's Gospel is not difficult to follow, but parts of it are very difficult to understand. It contains a great mystery. The difficulty is encapsulated in the question of some of his disciples: "*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*" They followed what he was saying to them but because of their difficulty in *understanding*, many of our Lord's disciples left him. Yet at the same time the Gospels are the most important part of the Scriptures because they present the Person and teaching of Jesus Christ. So in the Gospels we have relatively simple material (i.e., not hard to follow) which is of tremendous import. Having offered that introduction, let us turn to our Gospel today. It presents a simple scene, easy to visualize, but which contains much to stimulate our reflection. The blind man, the son of Timaeus, was at the roadside doing his typical work of begging. A caravan of noise and people approached and enveloped him. He was curious as to what was happening, and was told that Jesus of Nazareth was with the

crowd and was passing through. It was the opportunity of a lifetime for Bar Timaeus, an opportunity which he would not allow to pass him by. He began to shout for Jesus, appealing to him for kindness and mercy. His predicament was hopeless and he had nothing to look forward to. Life had dealt harshly with him, and his blindness terminated all his prospects. There is no mention of friends or family with him. So he began to shout at the top of his voice, calling out to Jesus above the humming and talkative crowd. He repeated his shouts as the crowd moved on, fearing lest Jesus, wherever he was, would soon be gone.

Now, what would have happened had he not begun to shout? Presumably he would have spent the rest of his days in his blindness, begging by the side of the road till he would eventually, years later, be found dead by the side of the road where he would usually have begged. But no, he began to shout. He shouted with the vigour of one who knew that Jesus of Nazareth was the only one who could get him out of his hopeless predicament. What would have

happened if he had not begun to shout? Jesus Christ would have passed him by. What would have happened if he had not shouted not just once, but several times? Jesus Christ may have passed him by for want of hearing him. What would have happened if he had simply asked someone to ask Jesus to come and heal him? Well, that request may not have been put to Jesus – clearly the best thing was for him to loudly and repeatedly place his request before Jesus himself. This is what he did, from a distance and from beyond the crowd. The sound of his voice reached the ears of Jesus, and we know what followed as a result. His persistence gained for him the ear of Jesus, and that led to his healing, which in turn seems to have led to his being a *disciple* – for we read that following the restoration of his sight, he *followed Jesus along the road*. The fact that his very name is reported by Mark suggests that he was well known in the Christian community. In the same Gospel's account of the Passion, Mark gives us Simon of Cyrene's name, together with the names of his two sons. This also suggests that he and his sons were well known in the Christian community of Mark the author. The point is that it is inconceivable that a request placed before

Jesus Christ would be simply ignored by him. That is not to say that the request would be automatically granted in the form requested - but it would not be ignored. It would be heard. Bar Timaeus made his request heard and as a result he received not only his sight, but (it seems) the grace of discipleship. As a result of our persistent prayer, what God knows to be best will be surely granted. Our prayer must be trusting, faith-filled and persistent, as was that of Bar Timaeus. If Bar Timaeus had not persisted, Christ would have passed him by.

If we persist, the answer still may seem to be a long time coming. In fact, some requests were presented to our Lord which he did not grant in the form requested. For instance, in the same Gospel we read that the people of Capernaum asked our Lord to stay with them (1: 36-37), but he refused. He had to go to other towns in order to preach there too, for that was why he was sent (1: 38). If there are larger reasons beyond our comprehension why our Lord does not grant a particular request in the form presented, doubtlessly God will grant the favour in another and better way. He will not ignore our

requests. He is listening. We are before him. Let us then be humble and persistent in our prayer, letting the example of the blind man guide us.



Friday of the Eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):19-20 The Lord became my protector. He brought me out to a place of freedom; he saved me because he delighted in me.

Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 4:7-13; Psalm 95; Mark 11:11-26

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, May no one ever

eat fruit from you again. And his disciples heard him say it. On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers'. The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, they went out of the city. In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered! Have faith in God, Jesus answered. I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying,

if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins. (Mark 11: 11-26)

Reverence Let us begin our reflection by situating today's Gospel passage within its context in St Mark's Gospel. At the beginning of the previous chapter (ch.10) we read of our Lord entering Judea, and giving various teachings including his prediction to his disciples of his coming Passion, Death and Resurrection. At the beginning of this chapter (ch.11) he approaches Jerusalem and, seated on the colt, enters the City to the acclaim of many. As we read in our passage today, going straight to the temple he looked around on the scene before him. As it was late in the day (11:11), he thereupon left for Bethany with the Twelve. Clearly, he had determined what he would do. The next day, leaving from Bethany for the City nearby, he gave a sign symbolic of aspects of his teaching. He cursed a fig tree which – it not being the season for figs – was not bearing its fruit. In the past the prophets had been commanded to perform actions symbolic of the state of the people and of the divine judgment on them. The fig tree here was clearly a

symbol of the chosen people and of their mission to bear the fruit of faith and obedience continuously, which they were failing to do. Jesus hungered for righteousness, and he was not finding it there. So he re-entered the temple and dramatically threw out all the mercantile activity and imposed reverence, prayer and teaching. With that, the rest of this chapter, and the two chapters (12-13) following it, are given over to Christ's last days of public teaching. Much of it is directed to his enemies and critics. The narrative of his Last Supper, Passion and Death begins in chapter 14. So our passage today sets the scene for Christ's last entry into Jerusalem and for the teaching he gave in or near to the temple prior to the supreme work of his life, which was his Passion, Death and Resurrection. The teaching of these chapters therefore has a special solemnity in St Mark, and our passage today initiates it. Today, among other things, we see Christ's insistence on *reverence* in all our dealings with God our Father.

Reverence is a virtue which easily eludes modern secular man. Liberty, equality and fraternity was the catch-cry of the French

Revolution, which – if it had any religion in it at all – was at best, deist. The deist God was scarcely the object of true reverence. He was the God – the *god*, rather - of nature rather than of Revelation, and tended to be a Principle of things rather than the personal Lord who cares for his creatures. He was the God – the *god* – of Reason, a very rational and reasonable god, a god whom man can more or less understand. When all was said and done, the god of the Enlightenment, which was the heritage of the French Revolution, was scarcely transcendent. Man had his measure – for, indeed, this god was man's creation. He was not revered and feared. Newman once said, when at Oxford and when told of the attitude of some at Cambridge, that what they needed in their religion was more *fear*. He meant that they lacked true religious *reverence* and a *sense of sin*. It is a very modern defect, but of course it spans the ages of sinful man's religion. In our Gospel today (Mark 11: 11-26), our Lord surveys the lack of reverence for his heavenly Father in the Temple. Imagine the reverence of Christ in the house of his own Father! If it is a command of God that we honour our father and our mother, can we imagine the reverence of the Son of God

made man for his own Father in heaven? Imagine the heart of Christ as he enters the City, seated on the colt and gazing ahead of him to the temple, the house where his own Father dwelt in a special way! He enters the temple, his heart brimming with loving reverence, and beholds the sound of animals and caged birds, the clinking of coin, the talk and hubbub, the traffic of people and, in general, the striking neglect in prayer and recollection. Within perhaps twenty minutes the place was transformed amid a series of rapid sensations, and reverence was imposed. Word reached the leaders of what had happened – and their hostility was overflowing. The hide of him! But fear of the people prevented their hand, for they saw in him a great prophet.

Let us contemplate the figure of Jesus Christ, especially Jesus at prayer. Let us contemplate the constant prayer that filled his utterly noble heart. He always did what pleased his heavenly Father. On one occasion, on seeing him at prayer, his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, just as John taught his disciples. Christ at prayer! The reverent heart of Christ! Let us think of the reverence of Jesus Christ in

all things to do with prayer, worship, and God. Let him be our example for all our times of prayer, for all moments when we raise our minds and hearts to God, and for any time we ourselves are in the Church, the house of God.



Saturday of the Eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):19-20 The Lord became my protector. He brought me out to a place of freedom; he saved me because he delighted in me.

Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 51:17-27; Psalm 18; Mark 11:27-33

Jesus and his disciples arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. By what authority are you doing these things? they asked. And who gave you authority to do this? Jesus replied, I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism- was it from

heaven, or from men? Tell me! They discussed it among themselves and said, 'If we say, 'From heaven', he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men' (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.) So they answered Jesus, We don't know. Jesus said, Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. (Mark 11:27-33)

God and Man It helps us to perceive the lessons of a Gospel scene if we can enter as fully as possible into the circumstances of the event, and listen to Jesus as he speaks within those circumstances. In Mark's account, Jesus has arrived from Galilee and is welcomed into Jerusalem to the acclaim of disciples and many of the people. He enters the temple, surveys the scene before him, and leaves the City for Bethany. The next day he returns and dramatically throws out all the business activity going on in the temple, and imposes a regime of reverence, prayer and his own teaching. Come evening, he again leaves the City, returning to the temple the next day. We may presume that he stayed by night at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus – whose

being raised from the dead is not mentioned by Mark. Our Lord, being a Galilean, may not have had the kinds of friends in the City permitting him to stay there. Alternatively, he may have wished to be out of the City of a night for safety's sake, for the leaders were seeking ways of seizing him out of the sight of the people. The night would have been the obvious time to do so. While it is reported to us in the Gospel that he stayed by night in Bethany, this may not have been generally known at the time. His whereabouts after dusk may have been a mystery to the leaders, his having slipped out of the City (at dusk or night) at the end of his day of teaching in the temple. These details are conjecture, for we are not told. Be all this as it may, our Gospel scene presents a new day in this last week or so of Christ in Jerusalem. Our Lord is once again walking in the temple, and undoubtedly people are with him, including his disciples. The "*chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders*" come to him and accost him with their question, by what authority has he done all this? He teaches publicly without any reference to them, the leaders. He has single-handedly and on his own authority imposed a new atmosphere in the temple of Jerusalem –

acting as if he were Master of the temple. What justification, they demand to know, has he, in any case a Galilean, for doing these things?

To me, a particularly fascinating thing about these encounters between Christ and the religious leaders, is the thought of who it was that the leaders were confronting and opposing. He was the very Son of God. *The Father and I are one*, he had told them – as we read in the Gospel of St John. That is to say, the dignity of the Man before them was unparalleled and, literally, immeasurable because his person was divine. Yet they treated him roughly, and this rough treatment would become brutal in the extreme, in the days ahead. What it does manifest is the absolute authenticity of the *Incarnation*. God though he was and is, he had become truly man. His manhood was manifested in his being subject to the conditions of a fallen world. It was manifest to the leaders that he was a man, though despite their blindness they might have dimly sensed that there was something more than this before them. After Pentecost, Peter publicly allowed that the leaders had not known that they crucified the Lord of glory. They thought they were

putting to death a mere man with extraordinary pretensions – though theirs was not a innocent mistake. Their blindness was due to their sin. All they saw before them was a man, their moral condition rendering them impervious even to his manifest holiness precisely as man. But as I say, it shows the authenticity of the Incarnation. God truly became man, subject to the sufferings that descend on holiness and on witnessing to the truth. At the same time, his divinity was in evidence for those whose moral condition enabled them to see it. Apart from his miracles, he was absolutely faultless. Whenever the scribes, the Pharisees and the priests accused him of fault – such as violating the Sabbath – he reduced them to silence in debate about it. His greatest and most unique claim was that he and the Father were one. The leaders of the people could not prevail in any way over him in direct discussion of such matters. All they could do was either retire in silence or promptly search for stones in order to bring about a lynching. Jesus was Master.

Let us place ourselves in the Gospel scene and contemplate, by the side of Jesus as his disciples, this encounter between him and the religious leaders. Calmly he stands before them, and calmly he again reduces them to silence. Tell me by what authority John spoke – the one who bore witness to me – he answered, and I will tell you by what authority I act. They were brought to silence. We do not know, they deceitfully replied. It brought the encounter to its end. Jesus Christ, God and man! Magnificent Man! Let us be by his side and live in union with him always.



Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 8:41-43; Galatians 1:1-2.6-10; Luke 7:1-10

When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was ill and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, 'This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our

nation and has built our synagogue.’ So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: ‘Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, “Go”, and he goes; and that one, “Come”, and he comes. I say to my servant, “Do this”, and he does it.’ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, ‘I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.’ Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well. (Luke 7:1-10)

The Work At various times I have known people who, suffering tragedy and difficulty, feel gravely burdened by the evil and injustice they see everywhere and which they believe they have experienced. They are angry with life and with God. I do not wish to discuss this precise problem – I mention it here merely to introduce the

profoundly flawed character of the world and in particular the fallen state of mankind. So grave is this that many of the Protestant Reformers taught that man is *totally* depraved. To describe the state of human nature in these terms is not the Catholic position. However, it does serve to highlight the recurrent moral crises of civilization and the bleak phenomenon which time and again in history faces the Church and the disciple of Jesus Christ. When the risen Jesus was about to leave his disciples and ascend to the right hand of his heavenly Father, he gave them an extraordinary mission. It was to make of all the nations his disciples. He promised them that he would send the divine Spirit and that he himself would be with them – that was the basis of their hope. So they set out, and persecution ensued – an iconic instance being the career of St Paul as presented in the Acts of the Apostles and in his inspired Letters. The point here, though, is that we who count ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ have to get it into our heads that grave difficulty lies ahead in the prosecution of the Christian mission. This will be so, not merely in terms of the daily obstacles and problems arising in the daily life of the individual disciple. There can

be massive difficulty on the grand scale of *civilization*. For the Church, which includes all of us, has the mission to gain for Christ not merely individuals but cultures and civilizations. If the culture, institutions and mores of society are not being engaged by the Church and her message, then it will be very difficult to make headway with numbers of individuals who are, of course, shaped by the culture and institutions of their society. For instance, the philosophical assumptions behind the common actions of a society, its legal prescriptions and philosophies, its growing customs – all this has to be observed and engaged by the Church in the name of the one Lord of history, Jesus Christ. It is this challenge which can appear to be so very daunting.

To give but one instance, in 2015 the previously very Catholic country of Ireland passed by referendum (no less) that same-sex marriages be recognized as such. It was a harbinger of what is to come in our very secular civilization, one in which there is a hidden but very real dictatorship. It is the dictatorship of *relativism*. Truth is not objective – it is relative to each. Perhaps the contemporary cutting edge

of this advance in the secularization (and relativizing) of Western civilization is the very meaning of man being created as male and female. God, as we read in the first chapter of the Bible, made man *in his own image, male and female* he created him. In losing God as the heart of everything, man has lost the objective meaning of so very much of his creation – including man. Currently that feature of man which is the lightning rod of so much controversy is his sexuality. As far as one can see, the tide in terms of Western society's laws (and therefore public recognition) is shifting towards an understanding of man that dismisses God as a totally private matter. The point being made here, though, is that so much of contemporary culture and civilization is shifting in a darker direction while considering itself as moving towards greater enlightenment. But Christ has declared that he alone is the Light of the world. Now, in different forms and degrees the Church has faced massive difficulties of this order before. What could be more daunting than the task Christ gave to his small band in such a backwater of the Roman Empire? But the work succeeded astonishingly over some three centuries. Then the task had to begin again with the

crumbling of the Roman Empire, and once again over centuries it was largely successful. The success was due to the power of Christ working through his disciples, most especially through his *saints*. I do think that the first millennium of Christian history will remain perennially iconic for the Church's children in the face of the decadence, turmoil and hostility of the world. But now, there is a further consideration. Not only will Christ and his divine Spirit be working *within* the Church to evangelize both individuals and society, but in a sense they will go *ahead of us* and prepare the way – and this is where we may turn to our Gospel passage for today (Luke 7:1-10). A *centurion* approached our Lord asking for divine aid. He was faced with the evil and suffering of death, and it was to Jesus that he turned, having heard about him. The point here is that he approached our Lord with a faith which our Lord praised highly. It was ahead of that of the children of Israel.

What this implies is that the action of God goes ahead of us, while remaining with us to support and guide us. It goes ahead to

prepare the hearts of the children of the world. This does not mean the absence of massive difficulties and even persecutions but it does mean that in God's good time success (according to his measure) is possible. Let us look to the past for important lessons. As the crumbling and chaos of the (so-called) Dark Ages began and unfolded, the Church's children girded themselves for the work. Her saints led the way and took the spiritual fight to her assailants. Through her, Christ won the day amid disappointments and difficulties, one after the other. Having gained the field, the work had to begin again. So it is in our day. We must take up the work of seeking personal sanctification and bringing Christ to our day, whatever be the odds.



Monday of the Ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24): 16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Peter 1:2-7; Psalm 90; Mark 12:1-12

Jesus began to speak to the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenant farmers and left on a journey. At the proper time he sent a servant to the tenants to obtain from them some of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent them

another servant. And that one they beat over the head and treated shamefully. He sent yet another whom they killed. So, too, many others; some they beat, others they killed. He had one other to send, a beloved son. He sent him to them last of all, thinking, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come, put the tenants to death, and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this Scripture passage: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes?" They were seeking to arrest him, but they feared the crowd, for they realized that he had addressed the parable to them. So they left him and went away. (Mark 12:1-12)

Being Rich One of the most prevalent instincts within the animal world is what we might call *territorial-ness*. Animals are *territorial*: they carve out their little domain and regard it as *their* territory. They

do not have a *theory* of territory possession, of course, nor do they understand their own instincts. They are simply driven by them, chasing off intruders or suffering the mishap of losing their territory through this or that circumstance. This possession of territory extends to *friends*: their friends are part of their territory too. For instance, a pet dog has its friend or friends in the family which owns it. When another dog comes into this circle, the pet dog may be very jealous of attention which the intruder receives. It may well attack the new dog as being a threat to its territory. It can't help doing this because it is driven by its instincts, implanted within it by the Creator for reasons of self-preservation and security. This same pattern is present too in the life of man. He has his territory which includes the many things he owns for the sake of self-preservation and the security of his own (family) circle. The danger for man, fallen as he is, is that he can sink to something like the level of the animal in seeking to possess things simply for his own sake. Those things that are naturally part of his "territory" and to which he has a right by legitimate ownership can, because of his faulty *attitude* to them, feed a great self-

centredness. Fundamentally, he can easily forget God the Creator (of whom the animal has no inkling) and think solely of himself. God has created and constantly sustains the world and man too. He places man in this Garden and gives him the stewardship of it, but it is meant to enable him to recognize and be united in friendship with the Creator by doing his will. In his more lucid and wise moments, man understands that he is a gift to himself as is the world too. He is a gift, and with the gift comes the responsibility to render to God what is God's. If he does not watch out, he will be *entirely territorial*: he will simply tighten his grip on what he finds he has been given, and choose to disregard the Giver. But the whole plan of the Creator in giving to man the care of the world and himself is that he regard this as a responsibility for which he will have to render an account. And by his natural conscience, man senses that he will render an account to a Judge.

So then, we all have a grave responsibility *to God* for what he has given us in life. This applies to creation, our environment, the goods of this world, our own life and our flourishing – everything, for

everything has come from God as his loving gift to be used well. Even the bad things that make us suffer he permits out of love for us – so we have a responsibility *to him* for the use we make of our sufferings too. Our Lord Jesus Christ has confirmed all of this, and raised the stakes much higher. What can get in the way of recognizing this is a grasping, self-centred territorial-ness. What I have is *mine*, and what I do not have I wish to make *mine*. In this way (so I can come to think) shall I flourish and gain my security. Being mine, I may use it as I wish and God (with his expectations) can be seen as an intruder. This is a major temptation of fallen man, and – remarkable as it is – it can affect his attitude to the greatest of God’s gifts, which is his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, God’s gift to man, can be seen as an intruder for he shows us the way to render to God all that is his due. This brings us to our Gospel today (Mark 12:1-12), in which our Lord gives a divine interpretation of much of the course of the history of God’s chosen people, and especially of its leaders. God entrusted so much to his people as his gift, but with the gift came a special responsibility to produce its proper fruit which was a holy life. This was not

forthcoming, so God sent his servants and they were not welcome. Our Lord told a parable about this to the chief priests, the scribes and the elders: *A man planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenant farmers and left on a journey. At the proper time he sent a servant to the tenants to obtain from them some of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent them another servant. And that one they beat over the head and treated shamefully. He sent yet another whom they killed. So, too, many others; some they beat, others they killed.* That was the story of much of the Old Testament – but God had a trump card which ought to have brought a windfall. It was to send his own Son. But sad to say, nothing changed: *But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they seized him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard.* Our point here, though, is the terrible *territorial-ness* which inspired this. For what do we read our Lord saying of their *motive*? They said to themselves, *the inheritance will be ours.*

When the chief priests and leaders brought our Lord to Pilate for a death sentence, Pilate could see that there was no guilt in our Lord. It had been out of *envy* that he was delivered up to him. They wanted the entire turf. Their minds and their consciences were entirely darkened by the sin of envy, among other things. They did not want God, so manifestly present in Jesus Christ, to take the field so that the harvest intended by God would come. It is a profound lesson as to the danger besetting fallen man and a signal call to poverty of spirit. We must have hearts that do not cling to the good things God has given us, for this clinging will close us off from even better things which God has in store for us. The greatest gift of all is Jesus Christ in whom is present every heavenly blessing. We are poor before God. Let us recognize the reality so that God may make us rich. He has become poor in Jesus Christ, so that we might become rich in Jesus Christ.



Tuesday of the Ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Peter 3:12-15.17-18; Psalm 89; Mark 12:13-17

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You are not swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or should we not? But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. Why are you trying

to trap me? he asked. Bring me a denarius and let me look at it. They brought the coin, and he asked them, Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription? Caesar's, they replied. Then Jesus said to them, Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. And they were amazed at him. (Mark 12:13-17)

Citizenship In some Christian groupings there is found a religious attitude that ignores and even despises the social, economic and political situation, with the duties and challenges it contains. In terms of religion, *all* that matters is each individual's personal response to the directly saving action of Christ. Speaking broadly, it addresses the personal longing of the human heart for union with God and is content to leave out of sight the state of society and the world. By contrast, there is a view of the Christian message that places *principal* emphasis on the unjust and oppressive conditions of society and its culture, and leaves the directly spiritual and personal dimension of religion to look after itself. In this perspective, the thrust of religion is towards liberation from injustices and temporal oppression. A case could be

made for saying that over the centuries the tendency of the chosen people of God – the children of Israel – was towards a religion of liberation from oppression. It had its roots in sacred history. Abraham was called from Ur of the Chaldees to a promised *land*. It was a very *material* promise. Moses was sent to lead the children of Israel out of their *slavery* to the promised *land*. Judges were raised up to lead the people in defence against attack. David established the kingdom over his enemies. A Messiah was promised, and as was clear in the time of our Lord, he was expected to be a political liberator who would inaugurate a marvellous era of plenty and freedom from external menaces. An image of religion such as this, involving the thought of divine promises, could tend to alienate the adherent from any civil authority that was not his own creation. The natural desire for freedom from material burdens and civil obedience was thus perceived as having the sanction of religion. It had been religious to resist Pharaoh. So it was religious to resist the Romans and their taxes. The problem was that this resistance would bring terrible political sanctions. Was it, then,

in accord with the divine plan not to co-operate with the foreign authority? *Should one, say, pay taxes?*

We are told in the Gospel that this question was formulated with the intent of ensnaring Jesus Christ into making a statement that would bring him into collision either with the people who hung on his lips and who looked for political liberation, or with the Roman authorities who, of course, imposed their taxes. It framed a question, though, that asked whether revealed religion embraced the world and its requirements, or was hostile to it or at best ignored it. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? God is our King and Lord and he has his laws for us. Yet here we are, collaborating with godless oppressors by paying the taxes which they impose. Our Lord could have entered into a long and subtle disquisition on civil duties and the extent to which the Roman authority had the right to regulate civil life and to tax in order to fund this. But he simply gave a general rule in response to a general question. Was it lawful to pay taxes to the Roman authority? *Give to the civil authority what is theirs, and to God what is his.* Broadly, one's duty to God is not

in conflict with one's duty to civil authority. One must live in the world respecting the requirements and duties of both orders. Religion is not an exclusive relation with God alone. In God, it includes one's relationship with the world. In general terms, therefore, taxes were lawful and they ought be paid. God is not thereby dethroned, for his plan and law embraces one's duties to the world. The man of revealed religion is, therefore, to be a good citizen. He is not often an insurrectionist, and if ever he believes he must resist civil authority, he does so with the spirit of Christian love. Of course, to say all this is not to resolve many agonizing particular questions, but Christ's response to this antagonistic question gives us, his disciples, an orientation. We must be oriented towards being good citizens, respectful of political and civil authority, and disposed to co-operate with its legislation and requirements. One's duty to God does not conflict with this. Rather, in general it requires it because God himself is the ultimate Cause of civil authority.

When Jesus Christ stood in front of Pontius Pilate, he was gazing at the representative of Caesar. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, he had said to those who had just handed him over. Calmly he tells Pilate that any power over himself that Pilate had, had been conferred on him from above – and our Lord was not just referring to Pilate's appointment as Procurator by Caesar. He was referring to the divine origin of civil authority. Because God creates and sustains society, he creates and sustains the civil authority which regulates it. So this authority must be respected. We must be good citizens if we wish to please God. Religion includes citizenship, and citizenship includes endeavouring to make civil authority all it should be according to God's plan.



Wednesday of the Ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 1:1-3.6-12; Psalm 122; Mark 12:18-27

The Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. Teacher, they said, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the

same with the third. In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her? Jesus replied, Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. Now about the dead rising- have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken! (Mark 12:18-27)

Afterlife Anyone who has studied the religions of man across the centuries and cultures knows that it is very hard indeed to generalize about the religious beliefs of mankind. The British anthropologist of primal societies, Evans-Pritchard, once made the same point in a well-known article on primal religions. The notions of the Afterlife that have obtained, vary enormously. This is to be expected because we do not see what awaits us beyond the grave. All we see is the grave or the

ashes. What has happened to the thinking and willing Self whom we have known? Man likes to think, and is generally convinced, that one's Self lives on. But nothing is seen. There are those who are convinced that one's Self vanishes with the dust into which the body descends, in a fashion similar to the centre of awareness of any animal. They think this because all that can be seen is physical corruption. Accordingly, many such persons will accept the well-known dictum: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Curiously, there have been religions which give little thought to the Afterlife. Their appeals to the deities in myth and ritual are centred on concerns for this life and they are content to leave the Afterlife in its natural shadows. It could be argued that the conscience of man, with its sense of guilt or approval, inclines him to expect a future Judgment which manifestly does not occur in this life. Be all this as it may, it is obvious that what happens beyond the grave is of maximum importance for the shaping of life prior to the grave. Because we know that we shall decline in our powers and eventually die, life is organized accordingly. With similar logic, if we know something about the Afterlife, the intelligent thing to do is to

organize life accordingly. There are those who know about the Afterlife, and who live regardless of it – which is not very intelligent. Such a course may be catastrophic. In fact, very important things have been revealed about it, and without doubt the greatest source of this revelation is Jesus Christ.

All of this introduces our Gospel passage today (Mark 12: 18-27). There was a party in the Jewish nation which did not accept the notion of a resurrection from the dead. This was the Sadducees who considered the Torah (or Five Books) of Moses – in other words, the Pentateuch – as the canon of the inspired Scriptures. They saw no proper foundation for a doctrine of the resurrection in these first Books – and at first sight, their position would seem to be correct. In fact, there is not a lot about the Afterlife in all of the Hebrew Scriptures – in what the Christian calls the Old Testament. But at their encounter with Christ, the distinctive position of the Sadducees was immediately shown to be, as our Lord put it, "badly mistaken." Our Lord instantly pointed to the words of Yahweh God himself to Moses from the

Burning Bush. "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," he said. Our Lord pointed out that God would not introduce himself as a God of dead bones and dust, of persons who were long since entirely extinct. The immediate implication of God's description of himself to Moses was that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were alive, and that Yahweh God was their God still. So the Book of Exodus –the author of which was the Holy Spirit working through Moses – taught that there was a resurrection from the dead. I do not know whether this revealing interpretation of the revelation at the Burning Bush had ever appeared in Hebrew literature before Christ, but it is most illuminating and original, to say the least. It also answered the Sadducees on their own ground of the Torah, or Pentateuch. Our Lord's utter mastery of the Scriptures is evident. We read of our Lord often instructing his disciples in the meaning of the Scriptures. For instance, on the morning of his Resurrection he passed the entire walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus with the two disciples, taking them through the Scriptures and showing how they spoke of him, and how he had to suffer in order to enter his glory as Messiah. What a memorable lesson in the Scriptures

this would have been! In our Gospel passage today, our Lord shows that the doctrine of the resurrection had been part of revelation all along. This is not to speak of Christ's own numerous teachings about the Afterlife that feature in the Gospels.

No prophet before him spoke as much of the Afterlife and of the resurrection from the dead as did Jesus Christ. He is mankind's great source of knowledge of what is to be expected after we die. How unintelligent it is to disregard what Christ has revealed – and how catastrophic it could be. Following death comes the Judgement. God will judge each soul at death. At the end of time he will judge all mankind. More specifically, it will be Christ who will be our divine Judge. Following the Judgment there will be either heaven or hell, with a purification from the remnants of personal sin to be generally expected for those who are judged worthy of heaven. Let us organize our lives accordingly, then, for life is short and eternity very long.



Thursday of the Ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Psalm 24; Mark 12:28-34

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, Of all the commandments, which is the most important? The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this:

'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these. Well said, teacher, the man replied. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, You are not far from the kingdom of God. And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. (Mark 12:28-34)

The Divine Law Man has a natural desire to get to the heart of things. It could be said that classical Greek thought especially strove to understand the nature of the world, with its emphasis on what in philosophical terms is called the *form* of things. It was fascinated with the *nature* of the things that make up reality. It endeavoured to get to the root of what things are, what morality is, what the Cause of all is – and in general, of *essence*. What is the essence of things, and what is implied by their essence? Obviously, this laid the groundwork not only of a philosophical tradition, but, eventually, of science and

technology. We might say that the classical Semitic cast of mind was rather towards knowing the *law of heaven*. The important thing was to do what heaven commanded. In the religion of Mahomet (so influenced by his understanding of Judaism) which arose in *Arabia* nearly six centuries after Christ, Allah was understood as the originator of all cosmic order and the source of Islamic law. Sun and moon move their course according to his will. A Muslim has no option whether or not to pray, fast, believe and testify to Allah. He must do so. It is his holy duty. He stands under the law. He cannot run away from it. I mention Islam only to highlight one difference between the Greek mind and the Semitic, and thereby to introduce an essential feature of the Revealed Religion of Abraham and the prophets. There are, of course, many differences between the religion of Moses and that of Mahomet. A fundamental one is the idea of the covenant. God chose Israel, and dwelt with his people as his own. They are the people of his special choice – indeed, he is their Bridegroom and Husband. The Law he reveals stands on this covenant and is imbued with the thought of it, whereas there is no such covenant in Islam. Nevertheless, there is a

similar emphasis on *Law*: the Law of God is paramount. The inspired writings of Israel were filled with directions as to what God's people should *do*. For the Hebrew, the uppermost question was: what, above all, should one *do* to please God?

So it was that, as we read in today's Gospel, "*One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, Of all the commandments, which is the most important?*" It is a tremendous service to man, to society, and to religion, if a great teacher can get to the heart of things – in this case, to the heart of the Law of God. At the question, our Lord gave an instant reply. The principal requirement of the Law of God was that we love him. "*The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'* The second is this: '*Love your neighbour as yourself.*' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12: 28-34). Our Lord immediately went to two

verses tucked away in the Book of Deuteronomy and declared that they provided the key to understanding the first requirement of the divine Law – which is to love God above all else. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 reads, *"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."* Our Lord then cites a second verse buried in the Book of Leviticus 19:18, *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord."* This is the second requirement of the divine Law. We might even say that in these two citations, Christ gives the two headings of the Ten Commandments, the first being the heading of the first three Commandments that speak of our duties to God, the second being the heading of the next seven which speak of our duties under God to man. Both these headings speak of love. They are the headings of all the prescriptions contained in the inspired writings. It shows, incidentally, that the inspired writings required an authoritative interpretation, and that Jesus and his teachings constitute that interpretation. With this key to the Law of God, our Lord provides us with a most powerful light with which to read the inspired Scriptures.

Were it not for the clear and synthetic teaching of Jesus Christ, the true key to the Law and the Prophets may not have been grasped. The religion of Abraham and the prophets is a religion which reveals the divine Law, but that law is a *law of love*. Man knows that his heart is made for love. The revealed law of God commands the perfection of love. This attains its fulfilment in Jesus Christ who is the revelation of the love of God. He fulfils and reveals what it is to love God with all our hearts, and by the gift of his grace won for us at Calvary, he empowers us to follow in his path of love. He enables us to love (in our poor way) as he has loved. Let us in Christ submit ourselves to the Divine Law – a Law which directs us to love.



Friday of the Ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 3:10-17; Psalm 118; Mark 12: 35-37

While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.' David himself calls him 'Lord'. How then can he be his son? The large crowd listened to him with delight. (Mark 12: 35-37)

Man's True Light

One of the many features of the religious context of our Lord's life and ministry was the variety of interpretations of Scripture. For instance, it is obvious from the Gospels that the figure of the Messiah, descendant of David, was interpreted by many as being a political and economic saviour. As Moses had liberated the children of Israel from the slavery of Egypt, so the Messiah would lead them to a definitive liberation from slavery to all such domination. Accordingly, on various occasions Jesus Christ was in danger of being proclaimed a king by the populace. As against this, there were purer notions of the Messiah. Simeon proclaimed the infant Jesus as the light for the Gentiles, and years later John the Baptist declared him to be the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. Again, it is obvious from the Gospels that whatever notion of the Messiah possessed the principal religious leaders, it was utterly opposed to that which our Lord himself presented in his own Person. Or again on a different level, the scribes and Pharisees insisted on a certain interpretation of the cardinal commandment of the Sabbath, and imposed a system of practices to safeguard this. Our Lord refuted their interpretations by recourse to

both Scripture and common sense. Yet another party, the Sadducees, had their interpretation of the very canon of the Scriptures – looking to the Pentateuch as the essential corpus of inspired writing. Accordingly, they did not allow for a resurrection. Our Lord demolished their position by appealing to the Pentateuch itself and by unmasking their meagre notion of God. One might even say that the history of the chosen people of God was the history of the interpretation of divine Revelation. The prophets, one after the other, were giving the inspired interpretation of what had been revealed, and in the process were adding to an increasing Revelation. The opposition they encountered represented opposing interpretations. Jesus Christ interprets, explains and fulfils definitively the Law and the Prophets. He is the very Revelation of God.

We see an instance of Christ as the master interpreter of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms in today's Gospel. It is Mark who is reporting the occasion. St Matthew also narrates the event (22: 44), with our Lord asking the Pharisees whose son is the Messiah. Luke

presents it (20: 43) too, as having come after our Lord had refuted his opponents to such an extent that they dared not test him any further with their questions. Mark also narrates the occasion as following what may have been our Lord's definitive victory over his attackers. We read that "*no one had the courage to ask him any more questions*" (Mark 12:34). This detail, given in Luke too, suggests that a point was reached when the scribes, the Pharisees and the leaders no longer attempted to dispute with our Lord publicly. Their opposition was implacable, but in public confrontations his victories over them were unfailing. This delighted the populace – for we read that "*the majority of the crowd heard this with delight.*" So then, Jesus asked the scribes, "*How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David?*" (Mark 12: 35). Presumably they were silent before this question. Then out of the obscurity of a single Psalm (110) our Lord plucked a teaching full of significance. The Davidic descent of the Messiah was allowed on all hands, but what of the inspired word of David himself? David said, under inspiration "by the Spirit" (*en to pneumati*), that the Lord God (*kurios*) said to my Lord (*to kurio mou*),

sit at my right hand. So in the same verse David gives to the Messiah the name "Lord," as he gives to God (*kurios*). Further, he has God placing the Messiah at his right hand, till all his enemies have been conquered. The Messiah will have all authority. For David, then, he is far more than just a son. How, our Lord asks evocatively, can the Messiah be David's son if he is his Lord, seated at the right hand of God? Our Lord is not, of course, calling into question that the Messiah is truly David's son. He is pointing to the teaching of Scripture that he is far, far more than *just* his son.

St Peter uses this surprising teaching of the Psalm in his first sermon following Pentecost (Acts 2: 34-35). He drew it from Christ himself, seeing it fulfilled in his Resurrection and Ascension into glory at the right hand of the Father. The point to be appreciated here is, though, that Jesus Christ is the key to the Scriptures and is himself the fullness of all that God has revealed. If we wish to understand the entire Scriptures, both Old and New, we must look to Jesus Christ. Our

Gospel today is an instance of this. He is the Light of the world, the Way, the Truth and the Life. Let us take our stand with him, then!



Saturday of the Ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 4:1-8; Psalm: 70; Mark 12:38-44

As he taught, Jesus said, Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the market places, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely. Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were

put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a fraction of a penny. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything- all she had to live on. (Mark 12: 38-44)

Example

I remember one married couple whom I knew particularly well. The husband spoke with a very ordinary accent of his country, while the wife spoke with a very polished accent. They had their first child and I was struck with the accent of that child as he learnt to speak. He developed a polished accent, in clear imitation of his mother. This was not surprising, of course, but it did remind me of the great influence of *example*, especially in the very early years. As that child began to have contact with other children, his accent began to change. Then when the child went to school, after some time his accent became the ordinary accent of the society around him – very much like

that of his father. The accent of the child's speech was an indicator of the influence on him of the *example* of those around him. Now, the child's mother was not especially religious. She went to church regularly but God was not a vividly appreciated Reality in her life. That child grew up without being especially religious either. In 1873 a child was born into a large family in France, a child by the name of Therese Martin. She had many sisters, and her parents were deeply religious. When she was fifteen she entered the Carmelite monastery of Lisieux, lived the next nine years of heroic fidelity to ordinary everyday duties, and died at the age of 24. Less than thirty years later she was canonized a saint by Pope Pius XI who declared her to be the star of his pontificate. In 1997 Pope John Paul II declared her to be a doctor of the Church because of the extraordinary value of her brief and simple teaching, expressed in her similarly brief and simple writings. What is especially manifest in her writings is her profound veneration for the sanctity of her parents. Her parents, Louis and Zelig Martin, set her on the path of holiness. In fact, she regarded them as saints, and this has been vindicated by the Church, for they were beatified by the Church in

October 2008 and canonized seven years later. Imagine Therese being born into a non-Christian family, or even of atheistic parents. Her life might have been entirely different. It indicates to us the powerful effect of *example*, for good or for ill.

In our Gospel passage today (Mark 12: 38 44) our Lord warns his listeners against the scribes. The chapter in which this is situated contains his exposure of the religious leaders, his defeat of the representatives of the Pharisees and the Herodians, his refutation of the Sadducees, his illuminating response to a question from one of the scribes, and his teaching on the Messiah as referred to in one of the psalms. He then tells his audience to beware of the scribes and the teachers of the law. He is obviously referring especially to the *example* they were giving of the practice of religion. *"Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the market places, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show they make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most*

severely" (Mark 12:38-44). So they drew honour to themselves by their prominence and ostentatious observance of the practices of religion, while at the same time they secretly practised serious injustice. They "*devour the homes of widows.*" Perhaps what was involved here was an insidious influence they exerted on widows to bequeath to them their properties. We may imagine many widows of Jewish society living a life of piety and it being suggested to them that it would be a holy thing to leave their property to the religious leaders of the nation, such as the scribes and teachers of the law. We read elsewhere in the Gospel that when Jesus was warning against the attachment to wealth, the leaders laughed at him because they loved riches. They scoffed at his doctrine because they regarded riches as a sign of God's favour. When Christ lay hanging on the Cross, his degradation showed them that he was not in the favour of God. They were proud, and also unjust. Our Lord warns his hearers against the *example* of their religion.

We ought to be very canny in respect to the *example* of those around us. The example for the Christian is *Jesus Christ*. The

Christian has a living exemplar, and the record of his ways is before us in the Gospel. *I am the Way, the Truth and the Life*, he said. St Paul, in writing to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11: 1), exhorted them to imitate him *as he imitated Christ*. Together with Christ, the Church proposes for us the example of those who have heroically and correctly imitated him. Those imitators of Jesus Christ are given to us especially, but not only, in the canonized saints, such as Therese of Lisieux and her holy parents. Let us then live in Jesus Christ, making him our pattern all our days.



Tenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):1-2 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; whom should I dread? When those who do evil draw near, they stumble and fall.

Collect O God, from whom all good things come, grant that we, who call on you in our need, may at your prompting discern what is right, and by your guidance do it. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 17:17-24; Psalm 29;

Galatians 1:11-19; Luke 7:11-17

Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out— the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord

saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, Do not weep. Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, Young man, I say to you, get up! The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. A great prophet has appeared among us, they said. God has come to help his people. (Luke 7:11-17)

Mercy According to Australian Utilitarian philosopher Helga Kuhse, Peter Singer is "almost certainly the best-known and most widely read of all contemporary philosophers". Prominent American journalist Michael Specter once wrote that "Peter Singer may be the most controversial philosopher alive; he is certainly among the most influential". Singer, the most noted Utilitarian of this day, makes the avoidance of suffering and pain together with the acquisition of pleasure a centerpiece of his system. He has won numerous awards for his promotion of ethics toward animals, and is a justifier of abortion and forms of infanticide. I well remember watching a brief television interview with him in which he was asked if he believed in God. With

his usual urbanity he said he did not – because if there were a God (as we usually understand him) he would have made a much better job of the world. The world, then, is not a pleasant place and therefore could not have come from a pleasant God, and God – if he is to be God at all – would have to be a very pleasant Being. Well, whatever of this flawed line of philosophical thought, it does set forth the immense problem of evil and suffering. This problem, for one so disposed, can constitute a very serious obstacle for theism – as Cardinal Newman powerfully acknowledged in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. Newman (now beatified) declares that were it not for the prior and ineradicable conviction of his conscience that there is a God, the suffering and evil of the world would make of him a pantheist, or an agnostic or an atheist. It is plain that the suffering and pain of the world, generation after generation, is unabating and truly vast. Let us prescind from the countless cases of dramatic and catastrophic suffering and mishap afflicting whole *groupings* and even *populations* – from death, injury, loss of property and so forth. That is to say, let us set aside the *broad* stage and consider the average *individual* whose life may seem to be

fairly uneventful and somewhat free of adverse drama. Still, we may be sure that even with him there has been, is and will be much disappointment and reversal – though it may be out of sight to the observer. Suffering is everywhere, for death and all that leads to it has spread through the whole human race. As we think of the course of history, it has ever been so.

All of this brings us to the scene which confronted our Lord as he approached the village of Nain. It was a funeral procession, with the body of a man being borne out for burial – the only son of a widow. How mournful, yet how common, how unnoticed on the broad scene of human history is such an event. It may be taken as a symbol of the hidden sufferings of each *individual* man and woman. Is there an answer to this? Yes, there is, and it is presented to us in our Gospel today (Luke 7:11-17). The dead young man was being carried out for burial, with his grieving and widowed mother accompanying him. It is an image of the frustration, the disappointments, the failures and the sadness of the ordinary man and woman. Yet Jesus Christ, the

Incarnate Son of God and Redeemer of the human race, was approaching. Before the cortege reached the gate of the town to take the path to the place of burial, they did not know that God become man was near at hand. But he was and presumably he saw them first — which itself is symbolic of the prior and constant gaze of God upon each of us. We read that *When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, Do not weep. Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, Young man, I say to you, get up! The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.* Everything in the life of man is held in the palm of God's all-powerful hand. Man's sufferings too are all in God's hand, and God in his Providence knows what is best to do. It may be absolutely impossible to see why God does not act as we would like him to, and there have been so many occasions in history when God has not seemed to act. We remember when our Lord was dying on the Cross and his enemies were jeering at him, mocking him for being left by God to die there. If he were all he claimed to be, would not God act to save him? But God seemed not to be acting. The very sufferings of his

divine Son had an immense importance for what God planned to do for mankind. But God would act in due course, and soon. Jesus died on the cross, but as had been foretold by the Scriptures God raised him up and soon after placed him at his right hand as our High Priest. God will act in answer to our prayer, but he acts in accord with his wisdom and our sufferings have their place in his plan.

What is certain is that he knows what is best. Our Lord did not prevent that young man from undergoing death, with the consequent suffering of his widowed mother. He did not arrive in time to prevent that funeral procession. No, but he came at the appointed time, at the time God willed, and did for him and for his mother what was entirely unexpected. He manifested the all-powerful mercy of God. All this is to say that whatever be our situation and circumstances, whatever be the course of our life in the past with its disappointments and difficulties, Jesus Christ our God, our Brother and our Redeemer, is near at hand, gazing on us with merciful compassion. He knows when to act and what to do. Let us ever place our petitions before him, perseveringly

and never losing heart, knowing that all is in *good* hands, for all is in *his* hands.



Monday of the Tenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):1-2 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; whom should I dread? When those who do evil draw near, they stumble and fall.

Collect O God, from whom all good things come, grant that we, who call on you in our need, may at your prompting discern what is right, and by your guidance do it. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: 1 Kings 17:1-6; Psalm 120; Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:1-12)

The Beatitudes

The longest summary of our Lord's teachings in the Gospel of St Matthew is given in chapters five to seven. It is called

the Sermon on the Mount because it is continuous and situated on the Mountain. There is plenty of teaching throughout the rest of this Gospel, of course, but it is disparate and borne along in the narrative of our Lord's travels, miracles and works, and is largely expressed in the form of parables. In these three chapters from St Matthew, our Lord's teaching is direct and comprehensive, with hardly any parables being used. Of course, when the Gospel was written there were no chapters. Hence this single discourse commonly called the Sermon on the Mount would have stood out in the undivided Gospel text for its length and distinctive character. It is all given on the Mountain as one continuous utterance, reminding the reader of the Law of God given on Mount Sinai long before. This is the new Law pronounced by Christ. If the Sermon on the Mount comprehensively presents the teaching of Jesus Christ, which then unfolds in further detail with the rest of the Gospel, our Gospel passage today is its general Introduction. Just as the entire discourse is called the Sermon on the Mount, this introduction has its name drawn from the distinctive form in which it is given. It is cast in the form of eight brief descriptions of

those who are blessed or fortunate, each beginning with the same word: Blessed (*makarioi*). Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who suffer because of Christ. This brief block of eight introductory maxims has acquired the title of "the Beatitudes," from the Latin for "blessed" – *beatus*. Now, for the Western mind with its propensity for logical system, these beatitudes, as with the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, and as with the rest of the Gospel itself, could present a problem. What is the unifying *key* to it all? How can we get a handle on the whole of it, as we might put it? Is there a perspective we can take, an angle from which we can view the whole, which might enable us to appropriate more easily the general teaching contained in these eight inspired utterances?

The key to understanding the "beatitudes" of our Gospel passage today (Matthew 5: 1-12) is surely the figure of Jesus Christ. With each "beatitude" there ought immediately come before us the person of the One who uttered it. He is the exemplar of what each means. When we read that the poor in spirit are blessed, we ought think of Jesus Christ

who, as St Paul writes, though he was rich in possessing the glory proper to God, divested himself of it all and became as men are, and even lowlier still to death on the cross. St Paul writes that he who was rich made himself poor that we might be rich. No-one was so blessed in possessing the Kingdom of heaven as Jesus Christ, and yet no one was as *poor in spirit* as he. In him is to be found the Kingdom. No-one *mourned* for the state of mankind so sunk in sin as did Jesus Christ. No-one was so *meek* as he in the face of hostility and insult. He did not respond with hostility and hate, but with a love that was holy and strong, and ever forgiving. No-one was so *persecuted* as he, suffering incalculable pain and degradation because of the sin of the world. For this reason, as St Paul writes, God raised him up to his own right hand. Those who are blessed in the sight of God are not those regarded as blessed in the sight of the world, for the exemplar of true blessedness is Jesus Christ. Moreover, this is not just an in-house thing for Christians. Christ does give his teaching to his disciples (5:2), but he does so with "the multitudes" before him (5:1), and at the end of it "the multitudes" were astonished at his doctrine (7:28). Our Lord is

proclaiming a very different path to happiness and worth in human living, and *he* is this path. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. So the best way to understand our Lord's teaching, and in particular his teaching as contained in our Gospel passage today – that of the "beatitudes" – is to contemplate throughout our lives the Person of Jesus Christ. Day by day we ought be living in his presence, coming to know and love him. Christianity is not just a doctrine telling us the right way to live. It is union in love with a Person, and his very Person is the embodiment of the doctrine.

Let us learn to love the Gospel passage of today. It is the famous summary of what it means to live a Christian life, formulated by the divine Founder himself. It has another form given by St Luke (6: 20-26) – perhaps a form used by our Lord on other occasions, or at least a form current within certain Christian communities. They point to a new heart forged by the grace of Jesus Christ, a heart modelled on his sacred heart. Let us seek to be like him, then, putting on his mind.



Tuesday of the Tenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):1-2 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; whom should I dread? When those who do evil draw near, they stumble and fall.

Collect O God, from whom all good things come, grant that we, who call on you in our need, may at your prompting discern what is right, and by your guidance do it. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: 1 Kings 17:7-16; Psalm 4; Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus said, You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand,

and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

Salt and Light An intriguing, indeed fascinating, feature of the world of our experience is that while it is made up of countless distinct units, all units are profoundly interconnected. The world is astonishingly vast in range, and at the same time astonishingly interrelated. This is a reflection of the Creator on which it continually depends. The one and only Creator is a trinity of divine Persons, united one to the other in an ineffable relationship of love. The imprint of this is found in the constitution of the world and in every man and woman. Each human person finds himself in relationships, and his life as it unfolds is the unfolding and working out of relationships. He cannot be happy if his life develops without good and authentic relationships with others. His deepest happiness of all will come from a profound relationship with his Creator, and the Christian knows that this means a profound relationship with Jesus Christ who is God made

man. But now, an important implication of this essential human characteristic – which is the place of relationships in human life – is that man is made for work, and his work consists in the *service of others*. We need others, and others need us, and this means that our best activity consists in the *service* of our neighbour. Mankind is a vast hive of work for others. Man lives by his work for others, and his happiness will in large measure depend on it. He should, of course, be remunerated accordingly, but I speak here of the sources of his happiness. Just as his happiness depends on his being in right and authentic relationships, so too, his happiness will depend on his doing good work for others. We are all called to ensure that as a result of our brief appearance on this earthly stage, the world will be a better place. This will happen through our work. Such is the calling of man. Our Lord raises this to a new level when he tells his disciples that they are to serve the world by being its *salt and its light*. Their vocation is to sustain, flavour and enlighten the world around them with the presence of Christ. Such is the calling of the Christian and such is the dignity of his work.

The problem is that so many people are frustrated in their attempts to do good work. To begin with, they are broken, faulty human beings themselves, and so they do not make the best use of their opportunities when young and as time goes on. Others around them are also wounded in their moral and general constitution, and they interfere with these opportunities. For a host of reasons, we are limited in our influence and effect, and it is possible to pass years of one's life feeling a profound sense of futility. What is my life adding up to? What am I achieving? A big bank balance? But what is the ultimate use of this? Or again, we look at certain others who attain prominence and seeming success, and we are puzzled at their good fortune and our lack of it. Of course, there are those who do not care anyway that their lives are not filled with good work, but they will never be truly happy. Now, in a sense, it is a very good thing that a person feel a sense of futility because it indicates that he wants to do something worthwhile with his life – meaning by this, some worthwhile *service* for others. But his sense of futility must be overcome. He must find a way to happiness in his quest to do good – which is to say, to do work that truly benefits

others and give worth to his life. Central in the answer to this common problem is the possession of *good models*. We need the right examples of living, the right examples of true success, the right examples of good work and of what it is to be salt for the earth and light for the world. The Christian knows that his example is Jesus Christ, together with the cloud of witnesses to Christ which the Church holds up for our imitation. Christ's work was to bear witness to the truth of his Person and his teaching in the midst of unparalleled difficulty, ending in apparent failure. Good work need not be seen by men. The world can benefit from a life that is hidden from it. The little person who is unnoticed by the world can, by his life in Christ, and by doing what Christ has commanded, be salt to the earth, and be light to the world precisely because he is in Christ.

"God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between

persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments. Therefore, I will trust Him, whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.” (Blessed John Henry Newman)



Wednesday of the Tenth Week of Ordinary Time

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Collect O God, from whom all good things come, grant that we, who call on you in our need, may at your prompting discern what is right, and by your guidance do it. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: 1 Kings 18:20-39; Psalm 15; Matthew 5:17-19

Jesus said, Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of

these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5: 17-19)

Christ our Guide The Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of St Matthew is the longest discourse by our Lord in that Gospel, and one of the longest in any of the Gospels – matched in length by the discourse at the Last Supper in the Gospel of St John. The Sermon on the Mount clearly draws together the span of our Lord's teaching, and this passage for our Gospel today would seem to be our Lord's response to the accusation that his teaching disregarded and even supplanted the Law and the Prophets. He was attacked for violating the Sabbath rest and, most seriously (and unprecedented) of all, for claiming that God was his own Father – thereby making himself equal to God. It seems that the charge of those most hostile to our Lord was that in effect he was overturning the religion of Moses and the Prophets, and setting himself up as the Centre of religion. They even accused him of

deriving his supernatural powers from an association with Satan, to support his new doctrine that was so unfaithful to the old. The Gospel text clearly suggests that what was driving this was *jealousy* of our Lord's supremacy over the people and his independence of them, the leaders. We have in our passage today (Matthew 5: 17-19) our Lord's response to this radical accusation. He had come not to overturn revealed religion, but to restore it and to bring it to its perfection. It had been the constant theme of the prophets that what God had revealed to Abraham, Moses and the prophets was being deformed and neglected. Our Lord placed himself in the tradition of the Law and the Prophets, and declared himself to be its fulfilment. In this sense he was indeed a new beginning. A characteristic of revealed religion had been that it involved a developing revelation. For instance, the revelation of the Messiah to come was a developing one. The Law and the Prophets was brought to new heights in Jesus Christ as part of a definitive and magnificent revelation. Beyond him God had nothing more to say, and in him was to be found the true understanding of what God had revealed to that point.

The course of our Lord's life, the vicissitudes that came upon him, the hostility he evoked, and, strangely, the ignorance of his opponents as to the nature of the Person with whom they were really dealing, shows how great was the need for a Guide in their understanding of Revelation. Our Lord's opponents upheld the divine law of the Sabbath but insisted with deadly seriousness that on that day the hungry may not pick ears of corn to satisfy their hunger. Nor were the sick and the impaired to be restored on the Sabbath. The question of *interpreting* the divine will is a critical one. The Islamic terrorist thinks he is upholding the Law of Allah the one and only God by attacking the infidel and destroying him. Thus does he *interpret* the divine Law. Man clearly needs a Guide not only to dispel his moral and religious ignorance in the first place, but also to understand Revelation once given and received. Christ was that Guide, just as he was also the divine revelation fulfilled. Now, just as the children of Israel needed the light of Jesus Christ to understand properly the revelation given to that point, so too do Christ's faithful need an ongoing Guide to *interpret* properly the fullness of Revelation as it is found in his Person. That

Guide is the divine Spirit given to the Apostles on the day our Lord rose from the dead, and to the infant Church at Pentecost. By means of the Holy Spirit, our Counsellor, Christ continues to guide us in all things pertaining to divine revelation. He continues this action in his body the Church. The Church, brought to birth and then guided by the Holy Spirit, makes Christ, the revelation of the Father, present in the world generation after generation. Just as jealousy and other sinful attitudes led very many to disregard and reject Christ as the Guide and fulfilment of revelation prior to his death and resurrection, so too the Church he founded and which is his mystical body evokes the opposition of many. As Christ was a sign of contradiction, so is the Church his body. As Christ was disregarded and rejected, so too his Church is frequently disregarded – and in particular the one who stands at the head of the Church, the Successor of St Peter, Christ's Vicar on earth.

John Henry Newman once wrote that religion is essentially a matter of authority and obedience. He was countering a widespread tendency to make religion a matter of personal judgment – that is, of

mere personal interpretation. We see its presence and action in the opposition to our Lord which evoked the utterances expressed in our Gospel today. Let us resolve to submit ourselves to the authority of Christ who is the fullness of all that God has revealed, and is its true interpretation.



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Scripture today: 1 Kings 18:41-46; Psalm 64; Matthew 5:20-26

Jesus said, "I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will

be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny." (Matthew 5:20-26)

The Heart

Our Lord has just declared that he has come to vindicate and fulfil the Law and the Prophets, not to do away with them. Many of the scribes and Pharisees had accused our Lord of disregarding the Law and the Prophets, but of course it was *their* interpretation of revealed religion which our Lord was flouting. But here our Lord goes further still. The "righteousness" which they

flaunted would never gain for them entry into the kingdom of heaven. It was not just that their religion and priorities were misguided. They were shutting themselves off from heaven, and the reason for this was above all the state of their hearts. They presented a front of religious practice while within their hearts sin reigned. Of course, we must not imagine that all the scribes and Pharisees were like this. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a disciple of our Lord – though a secret one, for fear of the Jews. Joseph of Arimathea was a leader of the Jews, and a secret disciple of our Lord. Their hearts were with him and they were open to his word. They had the courage more or less to declare themselves at our Lord's death, for they buried him. We read in the Gospel of St John that "*many even of the rulers believed in him, but because of the Pharisees did not confess to this lest they be put out of the synagogue*" (John 12: 42). So within the classes from which came our Lord's most implacable enemies, there were several who secretly adhered to him, though they were influenced by human respect (12:43). We read in the Acts of the Apostles (6:7) that prior to the testimony and martyrdom of Stephen, "*a great company of priests*

submitted to the faith.” Many of these may have been secret believers during our Lord's public ministry. Nevertheless, our Lord's condemnation indicates that characteristically, the religion in the hearts of many of the scribes and Pharisees was not pleasing to God. Their commonly-regarded righteousness was not to be emulated. What then does God want of us?

In our passage today, our Lord stresses the importance of what is going on in the *heart* of man, as against mere external practice. Of course, external practice has its due place. Our Lord's own practice indicates this. He customarily went to the synagogue service – we read that on his return to Nazareth, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, *"as he usually did."* He went up to the Temple of Jerusalem for the great feasts. He carefully observed the Pasch. He insisted that the lepers go to show themselves to the priests and to make the offering prescribed by Moses. He condemned certain practices of the Corban, for they *violated the commandment* to honour one's father and mother. But our Lord insisted on a religion of the heart, with high

standards. Revealed religion could not be reduced to mere practices, let alone distorted and foolish ones such as the prescription against picking ears of corn on the Sabbath to satisfy legitimate hunger, or the banning of any kind of healing on the Sabbath. Revealed religion was a religion of virtue and holiness of heart. The principal commandment was to seek genuine virtue of mind and heart. *Be holy*, God had said, *for I am holy* (Leviticus 11:44), a requirement reiterated by St Peter in his Letter (1:16). What matters to God is above all what is happening in the secret recesses of our hearts. What matters is the kind of heart we are acquiring. Accordingly, our Lord, having stressed obedience to the Law and the Prophets, presents himself as their Interpreter and definitive Successor. "*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'* *But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment*" (Matthew 5: 20-26). They were to forgive. "*First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.*" We are to strive to banish anger from our hearts, and to forgive from the heart. A religion of the heart is what pleases God.

There is an important philosophical theory of ethics that goes by the name of "virtue ethics." It stresses the ethical imperative of seeking virtue, not just virtuous practices. It stresses the importance of virtue for the very knowing of what is virtuous. Our ideal ought be to acquire a virtuous mind and heart. In our Gospel today (Matthew 5:20-26) our Lord stresses interior religion, the religion of the heart as being the fundamental matter. We ought obey God for reasons of true virtue, and this obedience will itself then nourish true virtue of heart. In this our exemplar and source of grace is Jesus Christ. Let this mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus!



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Scripture today: 1 Kings 19:9.11-16; Psalm 26; Matthew 5:27-32

You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your

right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:27-32)

Communion One of the most singular features of reality is that, though it is made up of countless distinct individuals, the impulse towards unity with the other is virtually universal. The universe, so vast and varied, is pervaded by interdependence and the desire (as we might call it by analogy) *for the other*. Down to the tiniest elements of protons, electrons and neutrons there is this interdependence and impulse towards *the other* (element). From that microscopic stage to the scene of the great forests there is a reaching out to the *other*, as we might put it. The great oak ascends towards the air and the sun, “seeking” *other* elements that will nourish it. So we could go on,

giving example after example. *Solitariness* is not, as we might put it, the order of the day – there is an unthinking bent towards *relatedness and interdependence*. Thus does our gaze turn to man, the crown of our world. Here too there is built into the structure of his being the fact and desire for *relatedness and communion*. From the first moment of his human existence he is dependent on the mother who nourishes him, on his parents for their constant love and care, for the world around him for the fulfilment of his other needs. He is essentially dependent, just as others in their measure depend on him and will increasingly depend on him. He is deeply dependent on others for *their love*. He *desires* to give and receive this love, even if he is barely aware of the fact. He is a being created in communion and for communion with God and with his fellows. The all-important challenge is that he become aware of this fact, that he understand just what this involves and how he is to bring his intended destiny to its true fulfilment. For this, man has two great sources to guide him – reason and divine revelation. Both can be misunderstood, and both he must get right. Now, so deeply part of the constitution of man is his drive for communion that if it is not ordered

in accord with right reason and divine revelation it will derail and cause dislocations in both the individual and in society. In large measure, this is because of the beautiful power of human sexuality. For the generality of men and women all of this finds its fulfilment in marriage – meaning, if it needs to be said, a stable marital union between a man and a woman, having and raising offspring as its natural issue.

For several centuries a foremost issue in human thought and controversy has been that of *personal freedom*. It is imperative that *I be free*, and this (it is thought) means freedom from authority that restrains. It accepts the authority of moral obligation, provided it is *I* who decides what is right and wrong. The authority of another to decide what is morally obligatory for me is not allowed. Something may be of obligation, but only if *I* decide that it is obligatory for me. Moral truth is relative, and this is an iron-cast absolute such that Benedict XVI famously and repeatedly described the moral culture of our age as a form of dictatorship. It is the dictatorship of moral relativism. But the point here is that for the past century or so the

cutting edge of this assumption that I am free to decide what is morally right for me is *human sexuality*. It is this issue which constitutes the arena of what it is to be free. I am free to express myself in whatever way I like in the realm of sexuality, and no one has the right to say I may not. Just as I may drink my favourite coffee as I wish, so too my sexuality. It is a major source of deep satisfaction and I have the right to drink of this as *I* judge fit. Well now, apart from the barely imaginable effects on human society of a runaway living out of this view, what may we say of it? In view of the focus of our Lord's words in our Gospel today (Matthew 5:27-32), let us set aside the exploitation by the subject of *solitary* sex. This is plainly a profound distortion of the impulse towards *communion* which one's sexuality triggers and sustains. Yes, human sexuality carries a person towards *communion with the other*. But this simple statement cannot be said to be the beginning and end of it, as if *mere communion of any kind* satisfies the meaning of sexuality and its intended expression. This is because while communion with the other can take a host of forms, sexual expression and action obviously includes *openness to procreation* with all its

implications. This means that human sexuality is intended for marital union between man and woman and the raising of children within this family. Over the past half century there has been a great *sexual revolution*. Its claims are that a good society should separate sex from childbearing, that it should separate both sex and childbearing from marriage, and that men and women are interchangeable. Any innate sexual differences we observe are accidental or unjust constructs.

It has been commonly decided that it is the individual who decides *for himself* what is morally right. The fully free Self is what is pivotal. This principle is not applied absolutely across the board, but mainly in matters of apparent personal morality, and in particular personal sexuality. So, for instance, the needs of children may be set aside for the benefit of adults. Thus is common sense abandoned, divorce regarded as normal, homosexual relationships glorified in legislation as *marriage*, children produced in part by means of test tubes (in place of conjugal relations), with a host of other sexually-driven anomalies filling the day. In the midst of this tragic mess we must hear

the teaching not only of nature but of God the Son in our Gospel today. *Do not commit adultery.*’ *But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.* A life of communion in accord with God’s law is the way to life.



Saturday of the Tenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):1-2 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; whom should I dread? When those who do evil draw near, they stumble and fall.

Collect O God, from whom all good things come, grant that we, who call on you in our need, may at your prompting discern what is right, and by your guidance do it. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: 1 Kings 19:19-21; Psalm 15; Matthew 5:33-37

Jesus said to his disciples: Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by

your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No', 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5: 33-37)

Being True Our Lord's injunction, "*Do not swear at all: ... simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No', be 'No',*" is obviously an injunction against the unnecessary recourse to oaths as a means of assuring others that what one has said is true. Our Lord is not teaching that any taking of an oath is against the divine will. At our Lord's trial before the Sanhedrin, the high priest rose and adjured him to state whether he was the Son of the living God (Matthew 26: 63). The high priest was attempting to place Christ on oath and force him to declare his hand. To that point, our Lord had remained silent, but at this he instantly spoke. He was, some scholars would maintain, in effect speaking on oath. He said, *I am, and I shall come again seated at God's right hand*. It was this solemn statement of his divinity that immediately brought on him the death sentence, which he accepted in atonement for the sin of the world. But our Lord implies in our passage

today that our normal speech ought be such that an oath is rarely necessary. What we say ought be a constant expression of the truth. As with all that our Lord taught, he himself is our exemplar. It is unimaginable that Christ would have been less than entirely and simply truthful. On one occasion the leaders sent representatives to entrap him. They began their ruse by recourse to flattery: *Master, we know that you are a person of integrity, and that you do not say things simply to curry the favour of those who are important. A man's rank means nothing to you, for you speak the truth in simple honesty. Should we pay taxes to Caesar, or not?* Our Lord saw through their strategy instantly, and asked for a coin. We know what followed and it caused wonder and admiration. The point here, though, is that their introduction indicates the reputation of our Lord: he was a person who always spoke the truth without fear or favour. Indeed, in the Gospel of St John it is striking the number of times "the truth" is mentioned. While Moses brought the Law, Jesus Christ brought grace and truth. He described himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

The Church teaches that Mary the mother of Christ is the model disciple. She is mother and model of all the faithful. Consider the "Yes" that she gave to the Angel Gabriel at the beginning. We read (Luke 1: 26-38) that the Angel presented himself before the Virgin and announced the plan of God. She was to conceive and bring forth the Messiah who would be the Son of the Most High. Of his Kingdom there would be no end. Did she accept the divine will? One does not get the impression that she was being compelled to accept this course. God had sent his messenger to ask for her consent. A parallel might be the scene in the Gospel where the rich young man had asked our Lord what more he should do to gain eternal life. Our Lord, with love, *invited* him to sell all he had and to follow him. It was *not an order*. It was a loving invitation, expressing the divine will but not extorting obedience to it. The young man refused. The Angel announced the plan of God and Mary, having learnt that this was possible despite her being a Virgin, immediately accepted. Let us contemplate her simple "Yes" to the divine request. "*I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word*" (Luke

1:38). This is not an exact instance of what our Lord is referring to in our Gospel today. Nevertheless it is an instance of absolute authenticity in what is being said. Mary said "Yes" to the Angel, and that "Yes" was filled with truth. Her whole soul was expressed in her acceptance. In this, Mary, under Christ, is our example. Everything we do – as creatures and children of God, and as disciples of Christ who share his life – ought be characterised by truth and authenticity. This applies to our simple speech, our actions, and our very thoughts. Our speech ought not deceive. Our actions ought not deceive. Our very thoughts ought not be deceptive of ourselves, for we can deceive ourselves by thoughts that cloud us in unreality. Have you noticed others "talking to themselves," or yourself doing this? Much of this is unreal thinking acting out frustrations, and not grounded in the truth.

Let us keep our eyes on the Person of Jesus Christ. His "yes" was always absolutely a "yes," without the slightest trace of untruth. The highest form of this is a truthful witness to Jesus Christ and his teaching. If the world and our culture in effect interrogate us

about our faith in Christ, our answer, be it in word or deed, ought be a simple and authentic "yes." Our whole lives ought be a "yes" to the question, Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of man and Son of the living God? *Yes!* The secret thoughts of our hearts, our every word and all our deeds ought be such that this faith is their very soul. Let us in every respect be true, then, to God and to Christ.

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 5: 33-37)

Yes, Yes! To Our Call There is in the Old Testament the account of a very beautiful and inspiring event. It is the call of Elisha and his eager and immediate response. Elijah has come from the mount of Horeb, "the mountain of God" where he stood in the presence of the Lord and received his command to anoint two kings and Elisha as his successor. He comes upon Elisha ploughing behind twelve yoke of oxen, and casts his mantle over him inviting him to join him in his life and to be his servant. Elisha reveals his nobility and generosity of soul immediately, for he "left his oxen and ran after Elijah", asking to be allowed to say good-bye to his parents before following him. Then he

abandoned his possessions “and followed Elijah and became his servant.” (1 Kings 19: 19-21) Elisha went on to be Elijah’s successor as prophet, and the suggestion is that he was given a double portion of his spirit. Elisha’s call and his generous response reminds us of the call by Christ of his first disciples who left all to follow him. Just as Elijah has been a source of inspiration for many Christians and for, for instance, the Carmelite Orders, so Elisha can be a source of inspiration for us all especially today as we think of his response to his divine vocation as a prophet of the Lord. He did not fail God but was his true servant.

We too every day are called to live our vocation generously. In our case it will probably be lived out in the ordinary course of a seemingly mundane life that will pass unnoticed beyond our immediate circle. It will, for instance, involve simple honesty and genuineness in our ordinary speech – and this is something our Lord refers to in today’s Gospel passage. *“All you need say is ‘Yes’ if you mean yes, ‘No’ if you mean no; anything more than this comes from the evil*

one.” (Matthew 5:33-37) Behind this directive is surely the summons to live every day in the silent presence of God who is our Father and our Judge, governing the course of all our actions in the light of the fact of his presence. Every day, be it in our speech, in our actions, or in our inmost thoughts, God is there calling us just as Elijah called Elisha. Our response to the numerous little calls of every day ought be in the line of that of Elisha and Christ’s first disciples, generous and immediate.

All of us who are baptized have received a call to holiness. It is a matter of responding to the personal invitation by Christ to follow him and to be his servant and friend. Let us think of Elisha. He provides a type of what it means to be such a disciple.



Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 12:7-10.13; Psalm 31;

Galatians 2:16.19-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she

stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is- that she is a sinner. Jesus answered him, Simon, I have something to tell you. Tell me, teacher, he said. Two men owed money to a certain money lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more? Simon replied, I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled. You have judged correctly, Jesus said. Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven- for she loved much. But he who has

been forgiven little loves little. Then Jesus said to her, Your sins are forgiven. The other guests began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins? Jesus said to the woman, Your faith has saved you; go in peace. After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. (Luke 7: 36-8:3)

Justification

Elsewhere I have mentioned the occasion of a talk that was once given at the University of Sydney. The speaker was a scholar of religion, and himself a Zoroastrian – I think he originally came from India. He regarded religion as, when all is said and done, a *technology*. It is a means of obtaining benefits through the employment of certain techniques. Now, even though religion properly speaking cannot be reduced to this, in the case of many practitioners religion

does seem to be a "technology", a technique. The gods are besought in order to obtain the material benefits that are needed. In primal religions the inherited myth of the beginnings is re-enacted time and again in order to keep the natural fertility of the earth renewed. The ceremonies are scrupulously performed in order to keep the higher spirits content. Now, what is noticeable in man's practice of religion is the *kind* of benefit he characteristically seeks. He wants prosperity in *this* life, temporal goods, protection from natural disaster and mishap, good health and the alleviation of sickness and disease, continuance of food and shelter – in other words, a flourishing of *temporal* benefits. His religion by and large serves this end, and it is a worthy end indeed. But are these the *best* things he could be praying for? On his own, man does not easily know what are his truest needs and what is his ultimate prosperity. I would ask an accomplished scholar of comparative religion whether it is ever found that devotees of a religion try to learn what the *gods* think his true needs are. Is it ever found that in his religion the deity has great concern for him, has a *plan* for his good that is quite new to him, and wishes to answer needs that he himself had not

thought of? I suspect this is rare. But the case is different with Revealed Religion. God encourages us to pray for all our needs, including material ones. But he has intervened with his own agenda for our good. He has declared and explained what we truly need and in what consists our truest flourishing, and he means to provide it because its attainment is beyond our natural powers. Our truest need is not to be liberated from hunger, sickness and material want, but from sin. Our best flourishing consists in a share in his own divine life. This is what God has revealed to be our need, and he has done all that is necessary to provide it.

That is to say, we need to be *justified*. We need to be made *good and right* in an absolute sense, in the sight of God. We need more than that God wink at our fallen and sinful condition, and from the goodness of his heart gloss over it. We need more than that God remain content in the thought of the glory rendered to him by Jesus Christ his Son, while ignoring the sinfulness of us his creatures. We need to be taken out of our very obvious sinfulness, and made whole. While man

is able to sense his need for a fundamental flourishing of soul, he is very likely to ignore this need or be oblivious of it, in favour of more material necessities. But God has revealed that *this* is our greatest need, and this is exactly what he sent his divine Son to do. "*Behold the Lamb of God*," John the Baptist said, "*Behold him who takes away the sin of the world.*" God sent his divine Son to justify us, to make us right in his presence. This divine goal for man is surely symbolized by the event portrayed in our Gospel today, in which because of her faith in our Lord, the sinful woman was made right. "*Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace*" (Luke 7: 36-8:3). Justification is the most excellent work of God. It is the merciful and freely-given act of God which takes away our sins and makes us just and holy in our whole being. It is brought about by means of the grace of the Holy Spirit which has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ, and is given to us in Baptism. When our Lord forgave the sins of the repentant woman in our Gospel today, she did not receive the manifold benefits of Christian Baptism. When we are baptised, a greater thing was done for us than was done for her. We

received the Holy Spirit and became just and whole in our whole being. When we sin after Baptism, we may reclaim our righteousness in Christ by repentance, by the Sacrament of Penance, and by working every day at living a holy life with the aid of grace. We ought strive to understand that our greatest need is the conquest of sin and the attainment of holiness. This is God's work in us, and we must co-operate fully with his redeeming and sanctifying action by our own generous effort.

The woman came before our Lord in humble faith and sincere repentance. That is all she could do. But with this, the grace of God came to her by the word and power of Christ. She was made right by our Lord's forgiveness. We can surely presume that she became a fervent disciple and set out on the path of holiness. This is our true need, and all other needs fall behind in comparison. Jesus Christ has told us what we ought seek in life above all, and how he is the answer to this divinely-revealed and all-important need.

Monday of the Eleventh Week of Ordinary Time C-2

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 21:1-16; Psalm 5; Matthew 5:38-42

Jesus said to his disciples: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two

miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5: 38-42).

Love There are those who build a lot of their Christian system on particular texts of the Scriptures. They are armed with texts and their explanations of them, and they go forth to conquer. The problem is that in respect to the most important books of the Scriptures, which are the four Gospels, texts cannot be used in a simplistic way. To give but one example, when our Lord says that if we ask we shall always receive, what are we to make of those occasions when he was asked for something by someone and did not give it? For instance, at the Last Supper he took off his outer garment and proceeded to kneel down and wash the feet of his disciples in turn. When he came to Simon Peter, Peter expostulated. Lord, you must never wash my feet! It was a firm and insistent request made by Simon to our Lord. Do not wash my feet! Peter asked, but he did not receive. Indeed, our Lord told him that if he, Peter, persisted in his refusal to let him wash his feet, their association would be at an end. Other examples could be given of

requests that were made to our Lord and which were denied. So the true meaning of our Lord's words in any particular text must be sought, and for this a wider context is often needed – the context of the rest of the Gospel, the context of the rest of the Scriptures, and the context of the mind and tradition of the Church. The same Holy Spirit who authored a particular text, and the particular Gospel of which that text is a part, and all four Gospels and the entire Scriptures, is the same Holy Spirit who guides the Church in her understanding and statement of the doctrine of Revelation. This is the broader context in which we must situate any particular text of Scripture. That is not to say that in order to understand a particular passage the reader must necessarily and always launch into a lengthy investigation of those various contexts. It does mean, though, that one's mind should be formed within this broader context and tradition in order to interpret well particular elements in that context and tradition. In order to understand well the teaching of Christ, one should strive to put on the mind of Christ, and that mind is the mind of the Church.

All this is not to say, though, that one should explain away or ignore the teaching of our Lord when it is especially demanding. Our Gospel today is a case in point. If one thinks of the sweep of human history, the attack of one man on another is typically met with a counter-attack, unless self-interest and prudent strategy advises otherwise. The general law is that an eye is given for an eye and a tooth is given for a tooth – and it very often goes beyond this to double or treble measure. The response to an offence is anger and this anger leads to violence. Of course, crimes in society must be punished by law, but the question here is the pattern that prevails in the human heart. There has generally been a great deal of violence among human beings. That is the pattern in human history and it means that there has generally been a great deal of violence surging in the human heart. There is anger and resentment in families, among clans and tribes, within and among societies, and across the face of the world. The instinctive conviction among so many would be that to expect a peaceful response to an offence is unreasonable. An offence cannot be suffered to go unanswered and unrequited. But now, Jesus Christ has come and has

declared a new law. There is to be a new pattern and it is based on his practice. "*You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well*" (Matthew 5: 38-42). Our Lord is employing characteristic Semitic hyperbole – the evil person, ordinary reason would indicate, must be resisted. One cannot encourage the evil person in his evil deeds, which is to say, by inviting him to continue in his evil path. In fact, our Lord elsewhere in the Gospel stresses that the evildoer must be corrected and, if necessary, cast out of the Church's communion. But what is manifestly clear is that Christ is commanding that *evil must be met by love*. Love is the answer to hate, offence and evil. The Christian overcomes evil by the highest standards of good.

What can we take from our Gospel passage today? We must put on the mind of Christ, and make his heart the model of what ought be going on in our own heart. The true battleground of the world is the

heart of man. We think of the trouble spots of the world, the terrorism, the clash of forces, the threats to world peace. Rather, there is a world war going on in the hearts of men. Anger, resentment, sin, surges along day by day in the human heart – and this has to be replaced by the spirit of Christ. We must learn to love from the heart, in imitation of the Master, and this is possible by the power of grace. Come, Holy Spirit! Fill the hearts of your faithful! Enkindle in them the fire of your love! Yes, let the fire of love grow, and let the fires of hate be quenched.



Tuesday of the Eleventh Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 21: 17-29; Psalm 50; Matthew 5:43-48

Jesus said, You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what

reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

The Romance There are many things that distinguish the human being. He is distinguished by his rationality and his power of choice. That is to say, he is not necessarily driven by instincts – although some human beings degenerate almost to the point where they are. He is called to be good, and this call he senses in his conscience. Another thing that distinguishes the human being, I suggest, is that he is a being of *romance*. By "romance" I do not simply mean the love affairs portrayed in so many cheap novels, movies and media generally, although I do mean love in a very broad sense. Man can see the grandeur in certain things, the beauty of something or someone, the greatness of a particular call, the ideal of an all-consuming project for society, and can give himself over to the *romance* of that grand and beautiful prospect. In this sense, his life can become a

romance. There was a book published on the life of Chesterton, and its title refers to the *romance of orthodoxy*. By this it means that Chesterton discovered the grandeur of Revealed Religion and the beauty of adhering to it in orthodox fashion. His life was a great romance in its gallant struggle to vindicate the truth of the Catholic Faith, as understood in its orthodox sense. Now, thinking in ultimate terms, what is there to be romantic about if the world as we see it is all there is? If there is just the fact of the world with its tangle, its evil and suffering, its good times and its bad, its hopes and its disappointments, why, as I think the Book of Ecclesiastes would ask, get *excited*? If a person is not a theist, I can understand a liking in him for the philosophy of, say, Frederick Nietzsche, or Sartre, or, for that matter, any theory of the meaninglessness of things. Without meaning to be disrespectful, philosophical postmodernism makes sense if there is no God. But ah! The case is very different once divine revelation is admitted. At the heart of the stupendous and vast reality around us is a mighty furnace of love. Beyond the veil of all that is material is an

unending sea of love. Romance is at the heart of things, and the proper response to it is romance

Yes, indeed, the *romance of revealed religion*! Mankind has every reason to be excited, every reason to be living a life of romance – a romance with that which is the Source of all reality, namely the God of love and mercy. There is a mighty Lover at work, and he is determined to bring each of us home to him. Terrible things have been done to the work of his hands, but he is at our side as our Hero, and he is filled with divine romance, the romance of love for us. The Creator of all things, visible and invisible, is a Being of *romance*. His romance led him to send his Son among us so that we might see him in the flesh, as Romance Incarnate. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we saw his glory, the glory of the only-begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. Thus it is that the romance of love is at the heart not only of the world but of every human life. There is much to live for, and because of what has been revealed to us, it is a beautiful world despite all we might see and suffer. So we, each of us, are called to live

the life of romance that marks the life of God made visible among us, Jesus Christ our Lord. We are to love as he has loved us. This is the romance of returning love for hate, good things for bad, and overcoming evil by doing good even to death in imitation of the Master. It is the romance of following in his footsteps and carrying his cross with him. So it is that our Lord says, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?"* The love of the Creator surges up from the depths and rains down from above. It is intent on overcoming – and will assuredly overcome – the evil that so often appears to prevail. Let us in all things join with Christ and make his love the law of our life and our response to all things.

The romance of God! The romance of God become man! The greatest romance in human history was played out at Calvary. The

romance of revealed religion! The romance of Christian love! The greatest romantic is the Christian saint. Let us set our sights high when we think of daily life, and whenever we begin a new day. What lies ahead is a stark alternative. Is it to be love, or is it to be its drab absence? Let us make of life a true and lasting romance, with our Lord's command ever before us: "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matthew 5: 43-48).

A Second Reflection: (1 Kings 21: 17-29)

Prayer for Pardon

We often hear of the power of prayer. Scripture clearly teaches that true and authentic prayer is powerful. It is with good reason that when we think of prayer we usually think of the prayer of petition – asking God for what we or others need. Now, there is one kind of prayer of petition that is particularly important and powerful. It is the petition for *pardon of our sins*, including prayer that God will avert the punishment our sins deserve. This kind of prayer is also very pleasing to God. Consider the prayer of King Ahab in today's first reading (1 Kings 21:17-29). Ahab

was a great sinner, but because of Elijah's threats of punishment from God, Ahab repented — *"he tore his garments and put sackcloth next his skin and fasted; he slept in the sackcloth; he walked with slow steps."* This humbling of himself was pleasing to God and averted the punishment on his person that had been threatened. The point here is that contrite prayer for pardon and forgiveness is powerful.

It is a pity that Ahab's sorrow for sin was inspired with much self interest. His concern was for himself and not his son. His repentance was superficial, but real as far as it went. To that extent it was pleasing to God. Let us ask God repeatedly for his forgiveness of our sins and the grace to be sorry for them for the best of reasons, especially in the sacrament of Penance.



Wednesday of the week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26): 7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 2:1.6-14; Psalm 30; Matthew 6:1-6.16-18

Jesus said, "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received

their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matthew 6:1-6.16-18)

For God Alone Man has been persistently concerned for many things, and the most obvious (considering the religious character of his

cultures) has been his concern for the divine. Archaeologists, anthropologists and historians of culture show a common interest in the religion of the societies they are investigating because it is recognized that religion has been at the heart of mankind's culture. The testimony of mankind is that there is an unseen realm and that we depend on it. There are powers above that affect our course, however those powers might be envisaged. The most advanced religions approach monotheism and in rare cases have attained a form of it. Philosophy has critiqued these beliefs and has investigated with great fruit the ways by which man comes to know God. There is the way of *revelation*. Man has often claimed to have received a revelation from God and the greatest instance of this is Christianity, the Founder of which claimed to be God. His followers totally accept his claim. Apart from knowing God by his revelation, there is the way of knowing him from his works – that is, from his *creation*. There are two points of departure in such a path. One can start from the external visible world with its movement, its becoming, its contingency and its order and beauty. Alternatively, a person may be led to the divine from his very

own person, with his openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his conscience. Cardinal John Henry Newman, the great apologist for divine revelation in the nineteenth century, was convinced of the effectiveness of the way to God from within the person – taking the voice and law of conscience as one's starting point. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states explicitly that "*Homo prudens, cum conscientiam moralem exaudit, Deum loquentem potest audire*" (no.1777) - "When he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking." It quotes the Second Vatican Council, which states that in his conscience man "*is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths*" (no.1776). Cardinal Newman described the conscience as the natural representative (the "aboriginal vicar") of Christ prior to Revelation (*Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, V).

All this is to say that in his sense of duty man carries with him a path to the divine, a sense that in the dictate of duty, God is near and commanding. The precise sense in which this is so requires careful

analysis and articulation, and as Cardinal Newman wrote in one of his works (*A Grammar of Assent*), it is a way that is difficult to express syllogistically. But it would appear to be an effective way to God from the world. In any case, and this is my point here, a lively sense of duty brings with it an abiding sense of the God to whom one is responsible. It is surely an excellent natural foundation for religion – and in particular, for revealed religion. The greater the fidelity to a properly enlightened conscience, the greater the chance of attaining a knowledge of the God who speaks in the dictate of conscience. This brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 6: 1-6.16-18) in which our Lord speaks of our doing what we do, for God alone. Our Lord is castigating the practitioner of religion who does what he does in the sight of men in order to win their admiration. Rather, he says, whatever we do we ought do "in secret," in our "own room" – which is to say, in the presence of God and for him alone. Our left hand must not know what our right is doing. It is typical Semitic hyperbole for a very grave reason. Our Lord is not meaning to be taken in the literal sense of always living our religion out of the physical sight of

others. In this very same Sermon on the Mount, our Lord has exhorted his disciples to let their light "*shine before men so that they may see your acts and give praise to your Father in heaven*" (5:16). They must set their lamp "*on a stand where it gives light to all in the house*" (5:15). Before ascending into heaven he solemnly charged his disciples to bear witness to him before all the nations. Our Lord is speaking of the purity of our intention, and of living always in the presence of the God whom we serve in our religion. By fulfilling our daily duties, by living according to the dictates of our conscience, and by bearing in mind Who it is who commands in those dictates, we shall have the means of living constantly in God's presence and of doing all things for his glory alone.

The conscience is a distinguishing feature of the human mind. By it we know what we should do. Its dictate, we naturally sense, is the echo of God's voice to us and the expression of his will. Let us strive to form our conscience aright by listening to the voice of the Church and the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. Thus

formed, we have in it the means of living constantly in God's presence and of doing all that we do for his glory. By our Baptism and by grace, the Holy Trinity dwells within our souls as in his Temple. The sanctuary of our daily life is the Lord God who abides within and who speaks to us in our conscience. Let us live for him, then!

A Second Reflection: (2 Kings 21:1.6-14)

The Gift of Christ's Spirit There are many things in life we naturally aspire to and hope to gain. But what we hope to gain will depend on the kind of person we are: what we regard as our treasure will depend on where our heart lies. Consider the final request of Elijah's disciple and successor Elisha, as described in our first reading today. He wanted a double share of Elijah's spirit. As with Elijah and his disciple, so it is with Christ and his disciples.

We are Christ's disciples, and as those who love Christ, our greatest gift coming from him would surely be a share in his Spirit. He has granted us a share in his Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. The Holy Spirit

comes to us in the ministry of the Church and in the sacraments. Let us treasure this Gift and learn to live by Him. The Holy Spirit will transform us into the image of Christ, who is the image of the Father.

Thursday of the Eleventh Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 48:1-15; Psalm 96;
Matthew 6:7-15

Jesus said to his disciples: "when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:7-15)

Forgiveness It is an interesting paradox that while the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are noted for their unabashed secularism, religion is high on the news. Modern secular culture seems intrigued, respectful, irritated and hostile to religion, which is to say that religion evokes a crowd of conflicting emotions in the modern age. At times religion is seen as a bearer of evil and violence. A terrorist is expected

to have been religious – he attacks and destroys in the name of his god. At the same time, it is taken for granted that religion stands for what is morally good. All understand that a religion stands self-condemned if it is immoral in either belief or practice (such as terrorism). Let us take two obvious indicators of the moral life: justice and love. Instinctively all know that a religious person ought be just and loving. Of these two eminent virtues, justice is easily understood – all know that justice should be accorded to all, and that a person's rights should be respected. A religion must stand for and support justice among men and within society. But now, *what of love?* We expect that religion stands for love of God and of neighbour, but what does it entail for, say, love for neighbour? A case in point is the response of the heart to injury. If a person is injured by another, he might refrain from returning the injury for reasons of prudence. The aggressor may be much stronger and it could be absolutely futile attempting to return the aggression. So for the sake of peace of mind and after weighing the alternatives, the injured one may accept the injustice quietly and just get on with his life. But if we are speaking of a religious person, will he

love the aggressor? Speaking more concretely, does his religion lead him to *forgive* injury gratuitously? Religions will generally command that we love our fellow man. But a defining indicator of a religion is the response it requires of the heart to an unjustified injury inflicted by one's fellow man. In the face of *injury*, what will be the response of the heart?

In 2010 Pope Benedict XVI was attacked in copy-cat fashion by the media across the world. He was maligned and besmeared with accusations, which according as his defenders had time to catch up on the rampant media story-lines, were shown to be baseless. As one person wrote, falsehoods, like horses, can bolt and make off into the distance before one has time to put one's boots on. But what was impressive was the response of Benedict himself. He quietly held his peace as the real truth about him got out. His aides put out a few explanations, but his response was not to revile in return, but to love humbly. When questioned on the plane to Fatima, he was asked about the attacks of the media. He said the most serious enemy of the Church

was internal sin. There was no mention of the attacks on him personally. He gave every indication of having forgiven those who had insulted him. It was a manifestation of the spirit of Christ in the face of personal and unjust injury. In our Gospel today, our Lord presents love for neighbour in the prayer he teaches his disciples. Most religions will stress love for neighbour, but the defining indicator of this love will be the response of the heart to unjust injury. Let us listen again to the Prayer which the divine Founder of the Christian religion taught to his disciples. He begins by saying that we ought not be like the pagans in our prayer. Then, in the reference to the attitude we ought have to those about us, he commands forgiveness. "*Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven those who are in debt to us.*" Our Lord does not leave it at that, for at the end of the Prayer he gives a comment, and it is a comment precisely on this petition of the Prayer. "*For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins*" (Matthew 6: 7-15). We must forgive those who sin against us, under pain of not

being forgiven ourselves. Forgiveness is a distinguishing feature of the Christian religion and of Christian prayer. It was a distinguishing feature of Jesus Christ himself in the face of injury.

Whenever our Lord speaks of injury, he insists we must return injury with love, and this love must involve forgiveness from the heart. Our Lord is not, of course, speaking here of civil laws and of how order in society is to be preserved. The evildoer must be resisted in society, and there have to be civil sanctions for perpetrators of harm. But our Lord is speaking of the response of the heart to injury. We must from the heart be forgiving, and we are warned that if we are not, we ourselves will not be forgiven. Let us, then, resolve to follow Jesus Christ, and model our hearts on his. *Learn from me*, he says, *for I am meek and humble of heart*.

A Second Reflection: (Ecclesiasticus 48:1-15)

The Gift of the Holy Spirit Our passage today from the book of Ecclesiasticus (48:1-15) is a eulogy on the prophet Elijah, on his

fortitude and achievements on God's behalf. This was hundreds of years before the coming of Christ. What was the secret, the key to his holy and powerful life? It was twofold: the gift of the Holy Spirit that he, Elijah, had received, and his readiness, no matter what the cost, to be guided by the Holy Spirit. We read that "*Elijah was shrouded in the whirlwind, and Elisha was filled with his spirit.*" Elisha received the same Spirit which had led Elijah. Let us consider Elisha's relationship to Elijah as, in certain respects, a type of the relationship that any human being can have with Christ, the giver of the Spirit. Christ came not simply to give the Holy Spirit to this or that chosen person (such as the prophet Elijah and his successor Elisha). He came to give the Holy Spirit to mankind, to anyone who chose to believe in him and live as his disciple.

Let us strive to appreciate this Gift, and in faith to become aware of it. It is a powerful reason to be apostolic – so that as many people as possible will possess this divine Gift.



Friday of the Eleventh Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 11:1-4.9-18.20; Psalm 131;

Matthew 6: 19-23

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your

treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! (Matthew 6:19-23)

Our Real Treasure A profound paradox deeply embedded in the human heart is, on the one hand, the calling and aspiration to life in *eternity*, and on the other, the great desire to remain with and possess the things of *this* life. Consider our situation. It is, I suggest, a cause of wonder that we *die*. We enter life with much to look forward to and to do, and either very soon, or after a little while, or at length, we *die* and are gone from this world. What, then, is the point? We make a brief appearance on the stage and are then gone forever, to be seen no more. What is notable is that we have intimations in our heart that we must expect some kind of reckoning after we have gone. But it is divine revelation which throws light on what happens after death, and therefore on the true meaning of this brief life. The point is that this

passing life, this flicker that is our brief appearance and to which we naturally cling, is a trial and test in preparation for eternity. So there is something about each day that ought inspire awe, and it is that the day before us is determining our eternal lot. We have a calling which is being worked out minute by minute now, and that calling is to be with God forever, beyond this earthly veil. It has started now, and is being worked out now. This brings us to the paradox, for one would think that we would be giving our whole heart, mind, soul and strength to the task of ensuring that our next life will be all that God wishes it to be for us. We know that the stakes are high, and everything about it is being resolved now. But, paradoxically, we are reluctant. We love this life and this world, and our heart is instinctively deeply attached to it. Our treasure is here, even though our real treasure is not here at all, but beyond. Generally we have little appreciation of the depth of our attachment to the things of this world. We are part of this world; we are deeply material (while being principally spiritual); we are made to enjoy life here and now; and we do not want to leave it. In fact, we

want to have more of it. It is difficult to let go and seek the higher and better.

In his classic *Spiritual Exercises*, St Ignatius of Loyola presents for our meditation the foundation of a life of union with God – which is to say, the fundamental challenge in attaining the true end for which we were made. He calls it the principle and foundation of everything. The challenge is to attain detachment from the things of this life which we so naturally love either for their own sakes or for ours, and instead to become entirely attached to the love and service of God which is where our true happiness lies. The challenge of life is to use the things of this world to the extent that they assist us attain the end for which we were made, which is to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord. This requires that we struggle against and overcome our deep attachment to the goods of this passing life. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 6: 19-23), in which our Lord is simple, blunt and uncompromising. "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and*

steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” The simple fact is that all the treasures of this life will pass away anyway. A person works long and hard to purchase a beautiful home, or perhaps to ensure that his children are given a very good education. These goals are worthy as far as they go, but they can collapse in a moment. The house is built, and a month later the person who attained his prize has a massive heart attack and is debilitated for the rest of his short life. His children are provided with their very good start in life, but they too have numerous vicissitudes. The mistake was that he gave his heart to purely temporal goods and goals, and did not seek God and his holy will *in* these things. Very seriously too, he entirely forgot the poor, or deliberately ignored them for the sake of attaining his treasure here on earth. Our Lord says elsewhere that by giving to the poor we shall have treasure in heaven.

We need light to see these things, and that light comes especially in the gift of faith. We are blessed by our Baptism with the gift of faith in Jesus Christ, which inclines us supernaturally to accept his word. This precious light is within. So we must make it our business to walk in this light, and never to allow it to darken. As our Lord says, "*If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!*" Christ is the light that enlightens every man, such that if we walk by his light we shall be saved. St John writes that at the Last Supper when Judas went out, he went into the dark. If we refuse this light, we shall be lost in the darkness, and how great will that darkness be!



Saturday of the Eleventh Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Chronicles 24: 17-25; Psalm 88; Matthew 6, 24-34

Jesus said to his disciples: "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life

more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:24-34)

God and The World There have been many great advances in the modern era. For instance, it seems to me that pedagogy – the science, the art and the understanding of education – has greatly improved over the last forty years. For example, fifty years ago the study of languages was straightforward in its method, and, I believe, *not* very effective for the general student. Now there is an entire battery of methods the student of a particular language can avail himself of. The same can be said of the teaching of religion – with this qualification, that the *content* of what is taught is often less satisfactory. Another notable advance over the last two or more decades is the rediscovery of the treasure that is the environment, and of the threat it faces. There is now a world-wide concern for the quality of man's physical environment, stimulated also by the Papal Encyclical of June 2015. Leading this wholesome charge are a variety of movements, some of which, though, bear along with them intellectual baggage which calls for critique. I refer to what appears to be the belief that the physical environment is *all that there is*. One gets the impression from the actions and statements of some (though not all) environmental campaigners that there is

something even divine or ultimate about the environment. I remember years ago a great Australian novelist – whose novels celebrated the Australian Aborigine and the Australian land – who saw his own ultimate resting place as being the *land* of Australia. The land! This earth, his home! His remains, his ashes, would be absorbed into the land his Mother, and that place and state would be his final abode. It was a facet of secularity – a form, I think, of ancient and persistent pantheism in which God is nothing other than the world, and the world is God. It is natural and good to love the world (with, say, its environment), for it is indeed our home, and God loves it as his creation. We have the responsibility to care for our common home. But the danger is that we can love and serve it as if it is *all there is*, forgetting that it is meant to point us to the love and service of something – of Someone – higher and ever so much more grand.

I say this as an introduction to our Lord's simple and powerful words in our Gospel today. Our Lord is blunt about this: "*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he*

will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon." *Mamona* in general means wealth or material possessions, but here our Lord sets it up against the Lord God, as if to personalize it and make it an anti-god. *Mamona* is the material realm which one serves in God's place, a "strange god" in violation of the very first of the Ten Commandments. This, then, is the danger facing man who by nature is part of the world. He depends on the world for his sustenance; he derives pleasure from it and he is fascinated with its beauty. It can either lure him from the Creator, acting as a false god, or it can act as a messenger, herald and servant of the Creator. It does one or the other, depending on the moral disposition of man. If we love God and are determined to serve him alone, then the world will serve its true purpose of drawing us to a deeper union with him. We must actively work to gain and preserve a profound attachment to *God*. If we lose sight of God and become attached to the world – to *mamona* – then the world will gradually seem to be a god, the ultimate reality, *all that there is*. The light will fade from our minds and all will be shadows. In thinking that the world is the ultimate beauty and treasure, we shall

have unconsciously drifted into a land of shadows. So it is that our Lord warns us not to stake everything on the satisfaction of physical needs and desires –on possessing the material things around us. *Mamona* cannot be our true goal. *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them."* In the first and foremost instance, we depend on God rather than the world.

Let us be as innocent as doves but as wily as serpents. That is to say, let us be aware of the danger of putting second things first. The first thing in life is the will of God and his plan for us – in other words his Kingdom, his rule. This is what we must seek first and above all, knowing that all is in the hands of God. If we but endeavour to do his will – which necessarily includes our work to improve the world and to draw from it the satisfaction of our temporal needs – then all will be

well. *"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"* (Matthew 6: 24-34).

A Second Reflection: (2 Chronicles 24:17-25)

Living in the Presence of God In the first reading (Chronicles 24:17-25) we have the description of the death of the prophet Zechariah, murdered in the court of the Temple. As he died the prophet cried out, *"The Lord sees and he will avenge!"* The murderers of the prophet ignored and forgot the presence of the all-holy God. He was present to them, but they chose to ignore him. If we wish to avoid sin, if we wish to be good, if we wish to grow in holiness, we must learn to live in the awareness of the presence of God. We are constantly in God's presence, as is every one of God's creatures. They exist only because he constantly wills it so. But because we do not see God, we tend to forget him. We tend not to advert to the constant presence of the all-holy God.

Let us train ourselves to raise our mind and heart frequently to God in brief prayer. Let us train ourselves to be more faithful to the slightest promptings of our consciences, because our conscience is the echo of God's voice, and the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit. As the prophet cried out, "*The Lord sees and he will avenge!*" Let us strive to avoid all deliberate sin.



Twelfth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Zechariah 12:10-11;13:1; Psalm 62;
Galatians 3:26-29; Luke 9:18-24

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, Who do the crowds say I am? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life. But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Peter answered, The Christ of

God. Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Then he said to them all: If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. (Luke 9:18-24)

Man and God There is a difference between mere awareness and understanding. An animal is *aware* of various things, and this awareness can be extraordinary in what, by instinct, it leads the animal to do. With great cunning the tiger gains its prey, and its catch is a tribute to the level of its *awareness*. But the tiger and any animal does not understand that which it is aware of. That is to say, it has no understanding of the nature of the object of its awareness, nor does it know that the object in question is itself an entity in its own right. The tiger does not formally know that the animal it has just brought down is a gazelle, nor that the gazelle is an entity in its own right. The tiger

does not even know anything about itself. In fact, it is not even aware of itself. It is only aware of other things, and this awareness is not a true knowledge. I say this to introduce the precious gift which is part of personhood, which is not just awareness but knowledge or understanding. We can *know* things, including our very selves. We can know the world about us better, and we can know ourselves better and better. Further, we have the capacity to do something about what we know – which is to say, we have the capacity to choose what is right and good. One of the most important areas of personal choice is precisely the matter of what and who we choose to know. If I do not exercise my power of choice in this matter – which is to say, if I allow myself to be governed by others in what I know – then I will deteriorate as a human being. To take an obvious example, if another is allowed to prevent me from knowing *God*, then I shall suffer seriously. This can happen – a state can prevent a generation of children from knowing God, or at least from knowing a lot about God and his holy will. The media in a country can prevent a population from knowing the true situation, and can cause it to be entirely mistaken. It is the glory of the

human being that he can know and understand things as they are. He must exercise his power of choice to seek to know the most important things in life, and then be allowed to do something about it.

There are all sorts of things that people choose to know. One man chooses to research and know history, and, as a teacher, to help others to know history. Another chooses to know all sorts of things – certain fields of sport, languages, certain persons. But absolutely speaking, what is the most important of all things to be known? Jesus Christ has given the answer to this. He said at the Last Supper that *"eternal life is this, to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."* The greatest thing we can possibly know is the Author of all, God our Creator. Man was made to know, love and serve God here on earth and thus to see and enjoy him forever in heaven – but this depends in the first instance on our coming to know him. This means seeking to know the revelation he has made of himself in Jesus Christ. *Have you been with me all this time, Philip, and still you do not know me? To have seen me is to have seen the Father,* he said. The

most wondrous thing of all in the history of the world is the fact and Person of Jesus Christ. The Creator of all, and Son of the Father, became man. The man Jesus of Nazareth, who lived at a very precise time in a precise location, who was born in a certain year and died in a certain year, was truly God and truly man in the unity of his divine Person. As the Son of God, who is "begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father," he was made true man, our brother, without ceasing to be the Lord God. The eternal Son of the Father, the same in being as the Father, but distinct from him as a Person, was perfectly man, just as he was perfectly God. As man he was composed of rational soul and a body. He was like us in all things but sin. He was begotten from the Father before all ages as to his divinity, and at a certain point in history was born of the Virgin Mary for our salvation. This, more than anything else, each person ought strive to know, appreciate and realize. It is the all-important thing in life. We must strive to grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, and on this basis seek to follow him closely.

In our Gospel today our Lord asks a fundamental question. "*Who do the crowds say I am?*" The Apostles gave various answers. So he asked them this further question: "*Who do you say I am?*" Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ – and as another Gospel adds – "*the Son of the living God.*" His mission was to suffer and to die that we might live. Let us resolve to know him deeply, and to live in his love by following in his footsteps. "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it*" (Luke 9:18-24).

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.464-469

(Jesus, true God, true Man)

A Second Reflection: (Luke 9:18-24)

"The Son of Man is destined to suffer grievously".

Suffering with Christ Our Lord's path was the path of suffering, and God has revealed many things about suffering. He wants us to

work to overcome it – praying and working for the alleviation of hunger and the various forms of sickness and deprivation. If we do not do this, as we read in the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we are not pleasing to God and we will be judged accordingly. But of course, experience shows that suffering cannot be avoided entirely. So what should be our attitude to suffering? Even in nature there are hints that suffering can become a pathway to blessings, and not simply to death. A person has a toothache, goes to the dentist, undergoes what might be painful surgery, but then emerges with a new lease of life. So too with, say, serious heart pains. A by-pass operation follows and the pain is replaced by a better life. This is surely a pointer that confirms what God has revealed about suffering in Christ. God has revealed that “death” (as it is and as we know it) was not intended by God when creating man. It entered the world because man disobeyed God's holy will. But God has transformed the meaning of suffering. It is now not just the path to death and oblivion, but is the path to life and glory, if this path is traversed in union with Christ. In the providence and plan of God, Christ had to suffer so as to enter into his glory. *"The Son of Man is*

destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected and put to death, and then to be raised up." Why was this necessary? We are not told – we are simply informed that it was the divine means for attaining the glory of God and our salvation.

Being a disciple of Christ is the path to our own glory, and he our Master has told us that the path he followed must be ours. *"To all he said, 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me.'"* (Luke 9:18-24). When God permits that we suffer, that suffering can be the means of a singular fruitfulness, provided we suffer in a manner obedient to God, in union with Christ. Therefore we must learn to follow in our Lord's footsteps in the fundamental matter of human suffering. We must put on the mind of Christ in our sufferings and deprivations, renouncing ourselves and taking up the cross that comes our way in the daily fulfilment of God's will for us. It could be the cross associated with our daily work responsibilities, or our health, our family life, our daily apostolate, or simply in lacking the attention and recognition that

we see others receiving. If every day we strive to do God's will with the mind of Christ our Master, carrying the crosses associated with that, then our obedient and Christlike suffering will be the path to life and glory for ourselves and for many others, just as it was for Christ. It is a turning point in the Christian life of a person when he at last learns to appreciate this difficult and central point. We must accept suffering obediently in union with Christ, when that suffering is clearly necessary. It is a further step again in our spiritual life to embrace some sufferings and mortifications that are not strictly necessary, in order to be more closely united to the crucified Christ. The Church helps us to do this in various ways.

Let us ask our Lord for the grace to be truly his disciples, following him in suffering. It is the mark of true progress in holiness when we carry our cross in union with Christ.

A Third Reflection: (Luke 9:18-24)

Discipleship One thing is clear from the Gospel of today (Luke 9:18-24). It is that Christ our Lord wants us to be his genuine disciples, disciples from the heart: "*If any one wishes to be my disciple,*" he begins. Just before he ascended into heaven he commanded his apostles to go and make *disciples* of all the nations. What we are, precisely as his disciples, matters more to God than anything else. It is the one thing necessary and it requires all our attention. To be his disciples in everything we, each of us, must understand that we are sinners and that Christ is our only Saviour. We must also understand what discipleship involves: it involves a sense of sin. Many people do not feel any need to be saved from sin. "Why do I need a Saviour?", they implicitly wonder in their hearts. This is one of the most striking characteristics of our times: the absence of the sense of sin. And because we are children of our times, we ought assume that we ourselves are affected by this lack of the sense of sin, of its reality and dreadful nature, and of the fact that we are sinners. In the sight of God who loves the world so

much, the striking thing about the world is that it is full of sin, and the striking thing about each of us whom he loves so much is that we are sinners. It is for this reason that we need a Saviour. And it is because of the sin of the world that God sent his Son. If we do not have much sense of sin, then we will not have an appreciation of Jesus as our Saviour. We will not turn to him to be cleansed of our sins and for the grace to combat sin resolutely and to overcome it. We will tend to think that sin is not very important, and if we look to Jesus for our needs, we will look to him for what in his sight are minor matters. We think of the crowds who pursued our Lord because he fed the thousands with bread or because of his healings. They wanted to make him king, but our Lord fled from them. We too shall find ourselves looking to Christ for purposes that are not those of God. Christ came precisely to take away the sins of the world.

What was God's purpose in creating each of us? St Paul tells us. Before the world began he chose us to be holy in his sight and full of love. What ruins this plan of God's is sin. We must awaken to our

sinful condition, and understand that Christ is our only Saviour. How do we gain this sense that we are sinners and that we need Christ our Saviour? By striving to keep close to Christ and by listening to the teaching of the Church, the Church which speaks in Christ's name. If you doubt that you are much of a sinner, begin examining your thoughts, words and deeds with this question in mind: "Would Christ think or say or do what I am thinking or saying or doing? Do I have the mind of Christ? But then too, to be his disciple we must understand the personal love of Jesus for us. Consider all that Jesus suffered for me so as to save me from my sins. We must understand that Christ loves us – he loves *me*. St Paul wrote, *Christ loved me and gave himself up for me*. He did not just die for the crowd, he died for me personally, sinner as I am. Until we have a sense of this, we do not know his love for us. That is to say, sinner though I am, Jesus loves me as if I were the only person in the world. Jesus loves me, he really loves me – this Jesus who is my Saviour. We must give time to contemplating the love of Jesus in the presence of Jesus himself. I would recommend real time in prayer, best of all before the Tabernacle. In the presence of the

Eucharistic Jesus, think of his love: Christ loves me, and gave himself up for me as if I were the only person in the world! Then with this foundation laid, we must learn what is involved in being his disciple. He tells us in the gospel: *"Whoever wishes to be my disciple must deny himself, take up his cross every day, and follow in my steps."* This means trying to be a really good person at the level of the heart, out of love for Jesus. Jesus is to be our model in what we think, what we say, and what we do. It means resolving daily to avoid deliberate sin, whether mortal or venial. It means repeated acts of sorrow for sin and regular Confession so as to be cleansed of sin and strengthened in the daily combat against it.

Let us especially strive to be Christ's disciple in how and what we think. The teaching of our Lord is very clear: *"What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and it is this which defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, and murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person."* It is above all in our minds and hearts that we will love and

serve Jesus, or fail to do so. It is above all in our minds and hearts that we must strive to resist the sin that is certainly there, and it is there that we must follow Christ most closely. As St Paul says, *let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*.



Monday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 17:5-8.13-15.18; Psalm 59; Matthew 7:1-5

Jesus said, Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You

hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5)

Anger It has been observed that a notable feature of the contemporary world is that very many are angry. If people are inconvenienced, they get very *angry*. If there is some natural reversal, some disaster, and the government does not quickly resolve the problems that ensue, that government will be the object of the people's *anger*. An entire part of the world – say, the Middle East – can be engulfed in anger for decades, an anger that is exacerbated by unending copy-cat retaliations. At times the anger is due not to personal injury, but due simply to the mistakes of others. This anger can be fuelled by the press which constantly seeks sensations and story-lines. One also notices that people are usually angry over issues that are ethical, which stands to reason. They are *angry* that someone has not done what he should have done. He had a duty, and he did not do it – and people are very *angry* as a result. Now, what is to be said of all this? To begin with, anger at personal hurt is the most natural thing in the world, and

anger at unethical practice is not only natural but it can have, of course, a certain value. If people are angry at the unethical behaviour of large corporations that brought on a general economic collapse, their anger may contribute to the reform of economic standards and institutions. If society is angry at corruption in politics or policing, its anger may be a force for the reform of those social institutions. At the same time, anger alone is a very blunt instrument for righting a wrong. I remember years ago watching a movie, the theme of which was spiraling revenge. Wrongs were answered by retaliation. The final scene was a dreadful duel which left one murdered and a permanent sense of injury between all the parties. It was a case of anger and its upshot resolving nothing. Moreover, very often those who are angry at the unethical actions of others have a poor recognition of the unethical actions in their own lives. They are quick to see the beam in their brother's eye, but are blind to the beam in their own. So, while it is very natural to man to be angry, it is, to say the least, problematic.

Let us put it this way. It is not difficult to be angry with others, yet immense complications can flow from it. We judge others, and we condemn them in our own hearts – and if we can get away with it, we condemn them to whatever punishment we can mete out to them before others. Now as a matter of fact, anger (Latin: *ira*) – though not every kind of anger – is one of the seven deadly sins. It is a capital or cardinal sin, and like the other deadly sins, if allowed to run its course freely, it will lead to the death of the soul. Anger can persist in the soul of a person for decades and indeed for the whole of his life, eating away at the vitals of love. It can lead to many other sins, and in any case can leave a person profoundly embittered right to the end of his days. At the last he goes before his Maker having failed to forgive those who injured him, whether justly or unjustly. Because of the consuming danger of anger in a person's life, it is imperative and urgent that an entirely different model be sought. That model is, of course, Jesus Christ and his teaching. He commands us to refrain from judging and condemning our brother. *"Jesus said, Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged,*

and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Our Lord notes how common it is for us to concentrate on the failings in others, while overlooking the failings in ourselves. *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye"* (Matthew 7: 1-5). While of course evil and wrongdoing must be resisted, anger should not be our response to the failings of our fellow-man. Christ and his teaching should be the benchmark of our thoughts, words and actions.

Christ won out in his contest with evil, sin, the world and the devil. But his victory was not due to anger. He was not an angry man — to the contrary, while strong, he was meek and humble of heart. His invitation to each of us is, *Come to me, you who are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart,*

and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. The great challenge of life is to grow in the likeness of Jesus Christ, especially in the shape, the spirit, and the character of our mind and heart. *Let this mind be in you,* St Paul writes, *that was in Christ Jesus.* That is the path to take.

A Second Reflection (Kings 17: 5-18)

Punishment for Sin One of the greatest of man's problems is the evil and suffering that he so often experiences. The problem is, why does he have to experience it if there is a good God? Now, there is no easy answer to this, nor is there any complete answer outside the answer provided by Christ, involving faith. However, there are two great facts that we do know: that there is a good God, and that nevertheless there is suffering. One part of the answer is suggested by today's first reading. God, being good, is not only benevolent (as we could put it), but holy and just and cannot tolerate sin in the final analysis. Our first reading today from the second book of Kings (17: 5-18) suggests that this feature of God's nature (his holiness and justice in respect to sin)

appears even in the course of life's events. *"They (Israel) would not listen, they were more stubborn than their ancestors had been who had no faith in the Lord their God.. For this, the Lord was enraged with Israel and thrust them away from him. There was none left but the tribe of Judah only."* That is to say that sin at times is punished here in this lifetime as well as in the next. The punishment for sin manifests God's holiness and detestation for sin – and is also a loving corrective in view of the eventual Judgment. Let us humbly accept reversals and suffering as at times being, perhaps, a judgment on our sins and as an opportunity to make up for them in union with Christ who atoned for the sin of the world. Other parts of Scripture also show that suffering is, apart from a punishment, also a merciful warning of what is to come unless there is repentance.

So then, a humble awareness of sin can throw light on the presence of suffering in life. Suffering can be accepted humbly as being well-deserved, and as a means of greater union with Christ who expiated for the sins of the world.

Tuesday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 19:9-11.14-21.31-36; Psalm 47;
Matthew 7: 6.12-14

Jesus said, Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces. So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road

that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7: 6.12-14)

The Narrow Gate It occurred in a notorious German concentration camp during the Second World War. The penalty was that some of the prisoners were to be executed. The German officer went through the lines of prisoners picking at random those who were to suffer the ultimate sanction. As one was selected, he broke down in despair, calling out that his death would leave his wife and children without him. Undoubtedly he had longingly thought of them during his incarceration, perhaps taking great care to avoid all unnecessary risks. Now all that had gone and he was to go to his death through no fault of his own, and he was inconsolable. It was the greatest crisis in his life, and it was beyond him. Suddenly and ever so quietly, a man stepped forward from the ranks of those who had missed the deadly selection. He went to the officer and asked to replace the man who had virtually collapsed with grief. Let him go, and I shall take his

place. Who are you? I am the Catholic priest here, he replied. The officer paused. All right – and turning to the grief-stricken husband and father, he said, You may return. The priest took his place beside the condemned men, and spent the rest of the short time remaining to him in sustaining them spiritually as they all went to their terrible deaths. He was St Maximilian Kolbe. A unique moment had arisen in that camp. It called for heroism, a passing through an especially difficult and narrow door, and *in that instant* he made the supreme choice. How was it possible? No-one would have thought the lesser of him had he not done this. To understand it, one must think of his history of similar choices during the course of his life prior to this special moment. He had been passing through the narrow door, the narrow gate, *for a long time*. That is to say, he had been living a life of high virtue day by day, choosing the path of greater generosity to God and man. When the moment came, he passed through the narrow gate once again, and that narrow gate led to his glory. In our Gospel today, our Lord asks us to enter not by the broad gate, but by the narrow one.

Let our minds pass to another crisis moment portrayed in the Gospel. It occurred in the palace of Herod the tetrarch – the administrator of Galilee (by courtesy of Caesar), and son of Herod the Great. He threw a great feast on his birthday, and the leading figures of Galilee were in attendance. They were men and women of the world, and, we must assume, far from God. The daughter of Herodias entered and danced in spectacular fashion. It was something of a sensation and Herod, seized by the moment and with liquor doing its work, called out that she was magnificent. Whatever you ask, he bawled, I will give you – he was flaunting his machismo preference for what pleased men. In two or three moments he had his answer. She wanted the head of John the Baptist. It was a crisis moment. There was *but a moment allowed*, just as there was but a moment allowed for Kolbe. Kolbe passed through the narrow gate at that instant, while Herod, long before him, passed through the very broad gate. It was the gate of least resistance to temptation, the temptation of human respect and of conforming to the perceived expectations of the world before him. Kolbe took the path that led to life, Herod Antipas the path that led to destruction. "*Enter*

through the narrow gate," our Lord tells us in today's Gospel, "*For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*" (Matthew 7: 6.12-14). On other occasions our Lord warned his hearers to be on the watch always, for no-one knows the day or the hour of his coming. This is commonly taken to refer to the coming of our Lord at the end of time, or at the end of our lives, but it also refers to any of his comings. Christ comes to us in the events of our lives, indeed he comes in every single duty that is before us. Cardinal Newman in a famous publication (*Letter to Norfolk*) described the *conscience* as the "aboriginal vicar of Christ." In every moment of duty, Christ is summoning us to obey and to follow him – in other words, to pass through the narrow gate, not the broad one.

The key to taking the narrow gate whenever it may appear before us is to endeavour to take that gate *always*. Every day we ought rise from bed with the intention of passing through the narrow gate

during the day before us. That is to say, we ought resolve to keep close to Christ, to imitate him, to follow in his footsteps in all the *duties* that lie before us. When the crunch time comes – and come it will, most especially at the moment of death – then we shall be ready to pass through the narrow gate once more. The time will come when, for the last time, two gates rise before us. One will be broad of entry, the other narrow. The one will lead to destruction, the other to life. Let us by our whole life be preparing for that final passage.

A Second Reflection: (2 Kings 19: 9-36)

Faith in God At various times in life and in various ways we can find ourselves confronted with what seem to be overwhelming odds. It could be a terrible sickness, or serious reversals in one's work, or very great temptations to sin. Whatever be the situation we face, we must remember that nothing is too much for God. Our faith in God's power and love must not be allowed to fail, no matter what he might choose to allow or do. The temptation will be to fail in *faith* when things seem too much for us, because we forget that God is God, and that nothing is

too much for him. King Hezekiah (2 Kings 19: 9-36) was faced with overwhelming odds. The Assyrians faced the city of Jerusalem, urging Hezekiah not to be so foolish as to trust in his God. Humanly nothing could save the city. But Hezekiah placed the impossible predicament before God and put his faith in Him. God saved the city.

Let us put our faith in God, while doing all we can to fulfil his will. We then trust in whatever God chooses to do, knowing that all is well if secure in his hands.



Wednesday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 22:8-13;23:1-3; Psalm 118; Matthew 7:15-20

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree

cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them. (Matthew 7: 15-20)

Good Fruit There are and have been Christians of a certain tradition who are of the opinion that a good Christian life will bring material prosperity, such that if there is not this prosperity, it is a sign of a defective Christian and moral life. Life will go well if one follows Christ closely and generously. Of course, there is a certain truth in this, in the sense that, say, many economic upheavals in the lives of individuals and in societies have their roots in less than ethical practices. But there is a widespread tendency to think that if something is done or said that brings on problems, then *because* it has brought on those problems it *must* have been imprudently done or said, or it was the result of a less than virtuous life. It is thought to be a case of a bad tree bearing bad fruit – and by their fruit you will recognize them. Now, one of the characteristics of the modern mind is its utilitarianism. If something is useful then it is good, because usefulness

is the criterion of goodness. If a word or deed "works," then it is good and should be done – whereas if it has not "worked" or is unlikely to "work," then it is not good. What are we to say of this? Of course, there is an element of truth in it, in the sense that we must be prudent. In one of his parables our Lord spoke of the five prudent virgins and the five foolish ones. The prudent ones had oil in their lamps at the time of the Master's coming. That is, they took the steps that were needed for success. However, our Lord applies the point to a higher order, in which there is a supernatural prudence, the prudence of bearing witness to him, while knowing that the means of spiritual success is different from that leading to temporal success. When our Lord announced the startling doctrine of the Eucharist and lost very many of his disciples as a result, many might have faulted him for being imprudent, to say the least. He was imprudent because he was not "successful." What he said did not "work." There was little fruit from it. Christ lost his following.

This introduces the matter of *Christian* prudence. One of the most notorious legal cases in mid-nineteenth century England was that launched by Dr Giovanni Giacinto Achilli (1803-1860), ex-Italian Dominican priest, against the famous Catholic convert, Father John Henry Newman. Achilli had been supported by the Evangelical Alliance in attacks against Catholicism, and Newman repeated in a public lecture what Cardinal Wiseman had said of Achilli. Achilli took Newman to court for libel. It finally resulted in a defeat for Newman in the courts, but the general public regarded Newman as having won his point. Achilli's reputation was in tatters. Newman saw himself as having taken a risk for the sake of Catholic and revealed truth. Now, what was Newman's reflection on his legal defeat? He saw in it the pattern of suffering leading to resurrection. He wrote to a friend that "*I am but inheriting the lot of Catholics, to suffer and to triumph*" (June 4, 1852), and to another that "*I do not doubt that the results of the late Trial will be found just what we should wish them to be. We are poor judges of what is best for the Church and for ourselves. So many prayers, so many Masses as have been offered in connexion with it,*

cannot be lost, cannot fail of their effect" (July 5, 1852). That is to say, the fruit that will come of a good tree may well be hidden. The prudence of the world is no measure of the prudence of Christ and his true disciples. Why did our Lord state so openly to the religious leaders that *the Father and I are one*, and that *before Abraham ever was, I am*? Was it not very imprudent? How could he hope for success in saying such things? There would be no good fruit from such a course, and the events seemed to bear this out – he was crucified. Such might be the thinking of the prudent man of the world, but Christ thought with a much higher prudence. The means to glory was to bear witness to the truth, in obedience to God, amid suffering and death. The example of Christ and his closest disciples shows us that there is a higher sense in which we are to understand our Lord's words, *By their fruit you will know them*.

The fruit that reveals the good tree is a life in conformity with that of Jesus Christ. We are to imitate him. As St Paul writes in one of his Letters, *Imitate me as I imitate Christ*. Again, *Let this mind be in*

you that was in Christ Jesus, he writes. The fruit that God wants to see is the fruit of such a mind, a mind that thinks as Christ thinks. It will not necessarily lead to material or temporal prosperity, or to the kind of success which the world accepts. It could lead to apparent oblivion, and in one way or another it will certainly lead to the Cross. But the suffering of the Cross will lead to the resurrection. It is by this fruit that the disciple of Christ will be known.



Thursday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 24:8-17; Psalm 78; Matthew 7:21-29

Jesus said to his disciples: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?’ Then I will declare to them solemnly, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.’

“Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock. And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined.” When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes. (Matthew 7:21-29)

God’s Will The obvious and immediate sense of our Lord’s words in our passage for today warns against a religion which consists of prayers and ceremonies (saying to Jesus, *Lord! Lord!*) while failing to be concerned for *doing God’s will*. Our Lord is clear: it is “*only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven*” who “*will enter the Kingdom of heaven.*” So a person may be regarded as “religious” by himself and by others and yet fail even to be saved – because he has deliberately

omitted to do God's will. The "will of God" includes observance of the *moral* law (which is accessible to reason – such as respect for truth, life and property), as well as observance of the *revealed* law (such as worshipping and honouring the true God as stipulated in the first two Commandments). Whatever be the will of God, it is the doing of this which provides the path of entry into God's Kingdom. This path is such that in one's *life* (and not just by empty profession) one accepts God's dominion as expressed in the moral and revealed law. As John Henry Newman put it in one of his books, the essence of (true) religion is *authority and obedience*: the authority of God (i.e., his Kingdom) recognized in our obedience to his law. Across the ages, man has typically been religious. What this has usually meant is a recognition of the gods or God, expressed in a concern for the observance of the *ceremonies*. Thus is one's security thought to be ensured. This was a major reason for the recurrent persecution of the Christian religion by the Roman Empire. The Christian god – a crucified man, no less – was perceived as usurping the position of the gods of the Empire and denying them the honour of the ceremonies. This threatened the safety

of the Empire because the gods would be profoundly displeased by this religious neglect and affront. The Romans saw themselves as pious because they recognized the gods in their *ceremonies*. The Christians were not pious. But Roman society was rampant with immorality, while the Christians understood that they had to be *moral* if they were to please Jesus Christ and God. All this is to say that a perennial temptation for religion is to neglect to be consistently *moral*. Christians too have frequently been found wanting in this – but at least they know, or should know, that *moral living* is inextricably part of *being religious*.

So what must we do to live a life characterized by fulfilling the will of God, and so gaining entry into the Kingdom of Heaven? To begin with, let us remember just what entry into the Kingdom of Heaven essentially involves. It involves union with Jesus Christ, in whom is found the fullness of the godhead bodily. Jesus Christ is in the bosom of the Father – he it is who is totally united with the Father. Union with him is the way to the Father, for to see Jesus Christ is to see the Father. He is the Image of the unseen God, and the Way,

the Truth and the Life. Now, the constant danger in the practice of religion is to advert to the presence of God *only* when saying to him, *Lord! Lord!* – which is to say, when engaged in (for want of a better word) the *ceremonies*. What man must learn to do is to advert to the presence of God often and indeed constantly in his *everyday life*. He must try to remember that God is *always* present to him and *always* looking on him – especially in the dictates of his conscience. It is not that God looks on man *only* when man is acknowledging him in the observance of the ceremonies – when he says, *Lord! Lord!* This is what man has so often thought, that the gods are attentive when the ceremonies are being performed, and if they are then the gods are satisfied and will grant the sought-after favours. But this is not what the true God is like and what he does. All things are sustained constantly by his loving will and all is before his gaze. This is what man must ever remember as he goes about his daily work. He must also remember what God is like – his character. He is a *moral* God who insists on moral living, and he has given to man not only his Law (as enshrined, say, in the Ten Commandments), but as presented and

embodied in the divine Exemplar for man, Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God. *Be holy*, God says to man, *for I am holy*. We must constantly remember the divine presence before whom we live, and we must constantly remember who God is. We must ever remember God's presence, what he is like and therefore what he expects of us. As God said to Abraham, "*I am God almighty; walk before me and be blameless*" (Genesis 17: 1). This is a foundational statement. We must *walk day by day* in the presence of God our heavenly Father, in company with his divine Son our Redeemer, in the grace of the Holy Spirit. This means thinking as God would want us to think, willing as he would want, speaking in a way that pleases him, and always acting in such a way that he will be pleased, praised and honoured.

Pleasing God means much more than saying *Lord! Lord!* When Jesus Christ was baptized by John in the river Jordan at the threshold of his public ministry, the voice of the Father was heard from heaven saying, *You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased* (Mark 1: 11). The Father was *pleased* with him. On one

occasion our Lord said that he always did what *pleased* his heavenly Father. Pleasing God and being truly religious means doing his will. In our daily life we ought strive to *please* God by our loving obedience, and his will is that we be morally good, indeed holy after the manner of his divine Son, Jesus Christ. It is the greatest ambition we could possibly have, to please God in all that we think, say and do. This takes us to a truly happy life (though it may not be “pleasant”) and it will take us to our home in heaven, where there will be eternal bliss.



Friday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27): 8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 25:1-12; Psalm 136; Matthew 8:1-4

When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said. Be clean! Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, See that you don't tell

anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them. (Matthew 8:1-4)

God's Will Our Lord has now completed the Sermon on the Mount, and in that Sermon St Matthew has presented in a single episode much of the teaching of Jesus Christ. It concludes with the response of the people (7: 28-29), that they "were astonished at his doctrine, for he taught them as one having authority, and not like the scribes." Having shown Christ to be the supreme teacher of God's Law, Matthew immediately shows him as Healer and Saviour. When Moses came down from the Mountain with the Law of God he was not approached by the sick for healing, but this is what happened with Jesus Christ – suggesting that the demanding Law of Christ is one of *mercy*. Life and health come from its observance. We read that "*when he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.*" In that prayer of the leper we have one of the prayers of the New Testament which was immediately

heard. Christ's power answers the prayer of need. There are a number of other prayers expressed to Christ which are immediately heard. For instance, at the wedding feast of Cana the mother of Jesus saw that the wine had run out, and she approached Jesus and simply said, "*They have no wine.*" The request was manifest, but it seems to have run counter to our Lord's plan as to timing – for he replied, "*Woman, what is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come.*" But the timing changed *in response to the prayer*, and the first of the signs were given that showed, St John tells us, his glory (John 2:11). On a later occasion, our Lord was passing through Jericho with the crowds accompanying him. Suddenly he heard shouts from a distance away. They were calls to him. He stopped and asked that the man be brought to him. *What do you want me to do for you? Lord, that I may see! Go, your faith has saved you*, our Lord replied. The man's sight was immediately restored and he followed our Lord along the road. In the case of our leper today, what is notable is the form of the prayer: *if you are willing, you can make me clean*. Let us consider this point. The form of the prayer involves an acknowledgment that all depends on the will of Christ.

There is a parallel between this prayer and that of Christ himself in the Garden of Gethsemane. Christ too, humanly speaking, would like to have been spared the burden of his indescribable Passion. Father, let this cup pass from me, he pleaded, sweating blood as he prayed. If ever there was an earnest prayer of petition, it was this. However much we may describe the intensity of the prayer of, say, the Canaanite woman who pleaded importunately for her daughter before Christ; however great was the prayer of the blind man at Jericho; however earnest the pleas of the ten lepers who asked our Lord for pity – none had the power and intensity of Christ's prayer of petition to be spared his coming Passion and Death. No other prayer pierced the heavens as did his. No other prayer filled the heavens and resounded in the heart of the Father himself, as did the plea of his beloved Son. It was *the prayer of petition par excellence*. All of Christ's prayers of petition were beyond compare in their effect. If Christ exhorted us to pray for what we need, guaranteeing that our prayers would be heard, what is to be said of his own prayers of petition to his heavenly Father? They are without peer. But look at the structure of his

petition. Let this cup pass from me, *but as you will, not I*. The prayer of the leper is not unlike Christ's own prayer, but of course Christ's prayer is immeasurably more perfect. The leper acknowledged that all depended on the will of Christ himself: if you are willing – *if it is your will* – you can make me clean. Christ prayed in similar fashion: *if it is your will*, you can spare me this cup. Let it pass from me, then! But then he adds, not as I will, but as you wish. It was the will of his heavenly Father that he suffer indescribably and so take away the sin of the world. We read that an angel came and sustained him in his agony, and we read in the Letter to the Hebrews that it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ offered himself as a victim on the cross. We may be sure that the Father answered the prayer of Christ, but not by taking away the Cross.

What would have been the reaction of the leper had Christ told him that it was the will of his heavenly Father that, for inscrutably higher reasons, he continue to suffer with his leprosy? That would have been the test of tests for him, and yet it is this test that is given to

many. There have been countless fervent Christians whose lot it has been to carry a heavy cross in imitation of the Master. While there are those who call it the problem of evil and suffering, there are others who look on it with the mind of Christ and proceed, carrying their cross. The fundamental thing is that God's will be done, and while we ought pray for all our needs, we must realize that God knows far more than do we what our true needs are. So then! *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come! Thy will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven!*

A Second Reflection (Matthew 8:1-4)

On Suffering Consider the simple Gospel scene of our Lord curing the leper (Matthew 8: 1-4). The leper said, *'If you want to you can cure me.'* Our Lord replied, *'Of course I want to. Be cured.'* There are many mysteries about the problem of evil, but one question that might occur to us is, why did our Lord not cure this leper (and all other lepers) *without being asked?* We do not know. But his response ('Of course I want to!') shows that he wants to cure the world of suffering, but many

things, it seems, lead him not to (up to this point). At least in this case of the leper of today's Gospel, prayer for healing was in some sense necessary. If he had not asked for healing, he may not have been healed. Our Lord did not take the initiative in healing him, but healed in response to the leper's request. So whatever about the many things we do not understand or that God has not revealed, it is clear that the healing power of God in respect to suffering is especially available *if we ask for it*. If we do not, it may not come our way.



Saturday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Lamentations 2:2.10-14.18-19; Psalm 73;
Matthew 8: 5-17

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. Lord, he said, my servant lies at home paralysed and in terrible suffering. Jesus said to him, I will go and heal him. The centurion replied, Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I

myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it. When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then Jesus said to the centurion, Go! It will be done just as you believed it would. And his servant was healed at that very hour. When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother in law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. When evening came, many who were demon possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases. (Matthew 8:5-17)

Christ and Caesar Our Gospel today presents us with a meeting between Christ and the centurion – one who, in his own way, represented Caesar. What can we say of the relation between Christ and Caesar, Jesus and the supreme temporal power? Our passage today is taken from the Gospel of St Matthew which is the most Jewish of the Gospels. It preserves the Jewish character of our Lord's speech and manner of expression more than does, say, Luke. It is at pains to show that Christ fulfilled in numerous ways the predictions of the Scriptures, and quotes the Old Testament frequently. It is very Jewish – but now, if there was one characteristic common to the Jews it was their resentment at the Roman occupation. Tax Collectors (such as Matthew himself) were despised as virtual collaborators. This latent hostility would eventually erupt in a terrible uprising against the Imperial Power, culminating in the stranglehold on Jerusalem by Rome and its subsequent razing of the City. Well then, how does this Gospel present the relations between this supreme civil power and Jesus Christ? The answer to this is a portent of the mission of Christ and his Church. Let us remember that St Matthew knew the Roman authority, for in the

matter of taxation he had been one of its representatives. In our reading of his Gospel, we do not get the impression that whenever Rome appears on the scene, it is in principle hostile to Jesus. The high point of our Lord's life was, of course, his Passion and Death, and it is there that Rome enters the scene with impact. Pilate, the Roman procurator, stood before the King of kings and found him innocent of the charges of sedition. He regarded it as absurd that the man before him was a political agitator, claiming to be a king. At a critical moment (27:19) Pilate's wife, convinced of Christ's goodness, pressured Pilate to let him go. It was not because of hostility but because of fear of a bad report from grassroots level that Pilate handed Jesus over to the mob with a death sentence. At this point, Rome was not hostile to Christ, but weak and poorly principled.

In our Gospel today (Matthew 8: 5-17) a centurion approaches our Lord and asks for help. Is it not a portent of the distant future – some three centuries – when Rome would turn to Jesus Christ for help (in uniting the Empire), and accept his kingship? For his part, the

friendliness and readiness to help by Jesus Christ is immediate. "*When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. Lord, he said, my servant lies at home paralysed and in terrible suffering. Jesus said to him, I will go and heal him.*" Our Lord immediately responds to the centurion's need. He is the true answer to the world's need, the world as represented by its supreme authority. The centurion himself is very respectful and is the beneficiary of our Lord's help because of his faith. Let our thoughts turn to our Lord's final instructions to his disciples just before he ascended into heaven. All power in heaven and on earth had been given to him, he explained to them. He, then, was the Superpower of God, but not the political rival of the Superpower of the world. Rather he is the world's Friend and Saviour. This is surely manifested in our Gospel today. I like to see in the judgment by Pilate on Jesus – that he was innocent – a symbol of the compatibility and harmony *in principle* between Christ and Caesar. Christ is the embodiment of God, Caesar is the embodiment of the nations of the earth. On one occasion the religious leaders, attempting to catch Christ out as a man challenging

earthly powers, asked our Lord if it was lawful before God to pay the Roman taxes. *Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's*, our Lord calmly replied. In principle, Caesar need not fear Christ. In fact, over the next few centuries, Caesar unleashed numerous persecutions on Christ and his Church, because he (correctly) saw an incompatibility between Christ and the many gods of the empire. But this enmity is not, of course, as Christ intends. In fact, Rome would eventually be won over – not by material force as if by a competing temporal king. It was by witness and by love that the Roman Empire became Christian.

However hostile the world around us may be, let us look on it with love. The centurion of today's Gospel may be regarded as representing the world of our Lord's time, the world to be evangelized. Our Lord responded to him with immediate friendship. There is an old saying that we ought treat our enemies as if we know that one day they will be our friends. However far from the formal profession of the faith those around us may be, let us serve them

with the same love and alacrity with which our Lord was ready to serve the centurion of our Gospel passage today. The heart of man needs Christ. In all our dealings with others let us remember this.

A Second Reflection: Lamentations 2:2.10-14.18-19

The Wages of Sin St Paul writes in the Letter to the Romans that the wages of sin are death. That is a generalization. It helps in its realization if we have an image of the utter collapse that is wrought by offending God. We have such an image in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (Lamentations 2:2.10-14.18-19). It is repeatedly taught in the inspired pages (and in this first reading) that it was the sin of God's chosen people that brought about the destruction of the city of Jerusalem. This destruction, with its death and havoc, is vividly described. It can even be taken as a distant foreboding of hell, if there is no repentance. But in the same passage there is hope: the inhabitants of Jerusalem can still appeal to the Lord, and they are encouraged to do so: "*Stretch out your hands to him for the lives of your children who faint with hunger at the entrance to every street.*"

Let us ask for the grace of a horror and detestation of sin, and a vivid appreciation of the fact that the wages of sin are death.



Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 19:16.19-21; Psalm 15;
Galatians 5:13-18; Luke 9: 51-62

As the time approached for Jesus to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy

them? But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village. As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, I will follow you wherever you go. Jesus replied, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. He said to another man, Follow me. But the man replied, Lord, first let me go and bury my father. Jesus said to him, Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Still another said, I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good bye to my family. Jesus replied, No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. (Luke 9:51-62)

Authority and Obedience I have often thought that in the matter of disagreements that divide Christians, at issue are not only positions that contradict one another. Of course there are indeed several positions among Christians that are in contradiction – for instance, there are those who insist on the divine creation of the Church. The Church is the work of Christ, and its constitution is his invention. In its fundamental

structure it cannot be tampered with. This is contradicted by others who regard the Church as the fruit of historical forces, and is little more than an historical instrument for the propagation of the message of Jesus Christ. This position is reflected in the oft-repeated reference to the so-called "movement" which arose from the ministry of Jesus. Or again, there are those, representing the Catholic position, who insist that the words of Christ about the Eucharist, as presented both in John 6 and in the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper, are to be taken literally. The Eucharist is indeed the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, which is to say his whole human and divine reality as risen from the dead. This is directly contradicted by others who insist that Christ intended the Eucharist to be a symbolic memorial and nothing more. On the other hand, there are many divergences within Christendom which have their origin, not in contradictory positions, but in differences of emphasis. For instance, a Christian view which places great stress on the experience of personal conversion and on its necessity for any genuine Christian life may lead to a despising of those who relish and insist on dogma as a foremost resource for Christian

growth. This may *lead* to what some insist is heresy, but here I am pointing to divergent *emphases*. John Newton, the eighteenth-century Evangelical author of the famous hymn, "Amazing Grace," gave great importance to personal conversion. Correspondingly, he had less concern for matters of Church order or the details of Christian dogma. This reminds us that it is important that we maintain the right stress in the range of the Church's doctrine and theology.

There is one stress which we of the modern era are likely not to give, and that is the stress on *authority and obedience* in religious faith. We will be prone to pass this over in favour of other emphases, such as personal experience, healing of hurts, personal discovery of faith, personal testimony to Christ and so forth – all of which are admittedly part and parcel of religion. Now, John Henry Newman once wrote that *authority and obedience* are of the *essence* of religion. That is to say, a fundamental feature of an authentic sense of God is the perception of his absolute authority. At the core of a truly religious response to him is obedience. In this he was opposing an emphasis on

one's own private judgment of God's plan, a religion that develops on the basis of private judgment. When Abraham was put to the test by God, he "believed in God" (Romans 4:3) and always *obeyed*. For this reason he is called "the father of all who believe" (Romans 4:11-18). In him we see a faith that involved a recognition of God's authority and obedience to Him. The Virgin Mary, throughout her entire life, embodied in a perfect way the obedience of faith: "*Let it be done to me according to your word*" (Luke 1:38). In their obedience, both Abraham and the Virgin Mary were but pointing to Jesus Christ who, obeying the Father perfectly, would ask, "*Can any of you convict me of sin?*" "*I always do what pleases him,*" he stated. Our Lord commanded obedience as the true test of faith and love. "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*" So it is that the Church, in explaining the true nature of sanctity, expresses it in terms of obedience. Sanctity consists in the perfect fulfilment of our daily duties for love of God. This "perfect" fulfilment of duties refers to the love and care with which we do God's will, as expressed in life's daily and humdrum responsibilities. In our Gospel today (Luke 9: 51-62),

prospective disciples approached our Lord. He asked them to submit to the exigencies of the Christian calling. His authority and obedience to him are essential.

Every day we ought rise with the immediate intention to submit ourselves to our loving Master. Our submission to his authority – an authority expressed in his word and will – is the test and expression of our love for Jesus Christ. Christ wants us to be his friends. He has called us to a religion of love. This mutual love informs every level of Revealed Religion and its practice. But it is a love that is marked by the recognition of authority and the response of obedience. The Christian faith involves the obedience of faith. In all things, let us be obedient to God, then!

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.144-149

(The Obedience of Faith)

A Second Reflection: Luke 9: 51-62

The Key The most fundamental feature of the Christian religion is an ardent devotion to the person of its founder, Jesus Christ. Christ required of his disciples that they follow him no matter what the cost, which is to say that he be the great love of their life. In today's Gospel (Luke 9:51-62) our Lord makes it clear to three distinct people that their following of him was to be unconditional. The danger is that while our hearts can warm to this ideal, the ideal itself can easily remain a "pipe dream," never lived out *in practice*. How then do we become truly dedicated to Christ? We must remember that for the most part our lives are made up of small duties. Not many of us are in situations that command the attention or admiration of the multitude. Most of us are in a position similar to that of the Holy Family – Jesus, Mary and Joseph – during those quiet and obscure years at Nazareth. Our lives are usually ordinary lives, lives filled with an ordinary round of duties. It is by the way we live our ordinary lives that we can achieve grandeur. The Church teaches that the perfection of the Christian life, which is to say Christian holiness, consists in doing as perfectly as possible the duties of one's state in life for love of God. For the lack of

this key, very many people never gain a sense of the grandeur of their lives. Being governed by appearances, they think that their daily round consists of nothing but boredom, difficulty, and insignificance. But this is not the case, and never should anyone interpret their lives in this fatalistic way. No matter what our situation might be, in the providence of God, there is both possibility and purpose in it. There have been many lay Christians, many priests and bishops who have spent years in solitary imprisonment because of their Catholic Faith. One might have thought that such a life was a waste and a tragedy. On the contrary, the Church has regarded their lives as having been most fruitful. This is because they have made the best use of their prison for the purpose of witnessing to Jesus and showing charity to others. We too must make the very best use of every day of our lives, no matter what be the situation.

We could be suffering from various sicknesses and difficulties of health. Our family situation could be very disrupted and full of difficulties. Our work could be very boring, humanly speaking, or

could contain failures, and bring very little recognition from others. Perhaps it is work that many look down on, and certainly take no notice of, by comparison with the work that others do and achieve. Yet God has permitted us to be in that situation, with the duties that every day arise from that situation. The key to discipleship is being focussed on one's daily duties whatever they might be, doing them well, and doing them for love of God. Consider even the case of a person with a terrible drink problem. He commits a crime and finds himself in prison. How is he to be dedicated to Christ? He must there and then begin again, saying to himself, "Now I begin!" He is to begin again by repenting of his past failure in duty, and then dedicating himself to fulfilling the duties of the present, and for love of Christ. Matt Talbot, whose Cause for Canonization is in progress, was a reformed alcoholic. One evening in 1884 Talbot went home in disgust and announced to his mother that he was going to "take the pledge" (i.e., renounce drink). He went to Holy Cross College, Clonliffe where he took the pledge for three months. At the end of the three months, he took the pledge for six months, then for life. It was the

start of his journey towards holiness. Talbot maintained sobriety for the following forty years of his life. He found strength in prayer, began to attend daily mass, and read religious books and pamphlets. He repaid all his debts scrupulously. There is no one who cannot respond to the call of Christ to be his disciple, his dedicated and ardent disciple. Everyone, even the one on his sick bed, or the one approaching death through some terminal sickness, or the person with a very ordinary or unpleasant job, or the person experiencing the typical difficulties associated with family life, all can say, "Now I begin!"

The secret lies in a loving attention to detail, the detail involved in fulfilling our responsibilities really well, with a true perfection, and fulfilling them out of obedient love for Jesus. It is thus that we sanctify our God-given work in life, and by means of our work, we sanctify ourselves and others as well. It is thus that we shall learn to follow Jesus closely – which is what he asks in our Gospel today.



Monday of the Thirteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46): 2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 2:6-10.13-16; Psalm 49; Matthew 8:18-22

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go. Jesus replied, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Another disciple said to him, Lord, first let me go and bury my father. But Jesus told him, Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead. (Matthew 8:18-22)

All for Jesus It is a great mystery of human history that when God became man to do an immense good, he was *opposed*. In fact, in the beginning of creation God was opposed, and that is where sin first made its appearance. God created the *angels*, and at his test of obedience, there was a revolt among many of them. It is the mystery of freedom. At the dawn of human history, man revolted against God. It was the catastrophe of the beginnings. The revolt continued, though many stood with God and in obedience to him. When God sent his Son to save the world from its sin, he was opposed by many. That is our backdrop and it is the story presented by the Scriptures and by the Gospels in particular. The next thing we observe is that those who opposed our Lord were most especially many *religious* leaders. Time and again the Gospels show the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the chief priests in conflict with our Lord and mounting an implacable hostility to him. The chief priests put him to death, a sentence to which he freely submitted as being the divine plan for the redemption of the world. Now, we can form the impression that it was *all* the scribes, and *all* the Pharisees, and *all* the priests – in other words,

all of the leaders of the people - who were of this ilk. Not so, and this fact illustrates that *all* have received the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ. In our Gospel today we read that "*a teacher of the law came to him and said, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.*" That is to say, among the *scribes* there was this person who felt within his heart the desire to follow Jesus Christ totally. Our Lord's response indicates that he had not considered the cost, but his desire shows that the appeal of our Lord and his teaching was penetrating the ranks of the opposition. Who is to say that there were not more? Nicodemus – a secret disciple of our Lord's – was a Pharisee, a leading Jew, we read. Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the Sanhedrin. St John, who habitually refers to our Lord's enemies as "the Jews" explicitly says that "among the rulers (*archontôn*) many (*polloi*) believed in him" (12:42).

This fact illustrates and symbolizes the *universal* call to Christian discipleship. All are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ. The "scribe", a teacher of the law, of today's Gospel who

wished to follow our Lord wherever he might go is surely a representative and reminder of this universal call. Our Lord's response to him, and his response to the next disciple, is a reminder of the radical character of this call. The "scribe" can expect few comforts, and he must understand this clearly. *"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* We read that one of our Lord disciples – one who had chosen to be with him, learn from him, follow him, and share in his mission – asked leave to attend family matters. He must have been directed by our Lord to participate in some way in the mission of his ministry. We read that on a different occasion our Lord sent out seventy-two of his disciples ahead of him to prepare the way by their preaching and ministry. *"Lord, first let me go and bury my father,"* the disciple in question asked. At this point, there must have been nothing more urgent than the mission, in our Lord's mind. Moreover, he wanted to make the point to this disciple – and perhaps to the others too – that he himself and his mission must take complete precedence over all else in life. Of course, we are not to take the specific directive that is

mentioned here as normative for all future circumstances. The point that St Matthew is reporting for us is that Jesus Christ must be supreme in the life of his disciples. His will and work normally will include all family commitments, but even there, it is precisely his will and his work that is decisive for his disciple. The disciple is radically committed to Jesus Christ as the love of his life. Our Gospel passage today invites us to place ourselves in the presence of Jesus Christ with each of the two individuals mentioned. There is the prospective disciple in the scribe, and there is the actual disciple in the one seeking leave. For each of them, and for each of us, the call of Jesus Christ is a total call. We cannot expect that our Lord will accept our being part-timers in his service. Everything in life must be for his sake.

What have I done for Christ to this point? What am I doing for him now? What shall I do for him in the future? Have I been a part-timer, so far? The Christian must sanctify everything in his life, which is to say he must do all for the glory of God, in imitation of him who is the Master. This gets down to the little things. Life is a

mountain of little things, and all together they make up a big thing. Each and every little thing must be done for Jesus. This gets down to the work of each part of each day. It is attainable, through personal decision and the grace of God.



Tuesday of the Thirteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46): 2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 3:1-8. 4:11-12; Psalm 5; Matthew 8:23-27

Then Jesus got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, Lord, save us! We're going to drown! He replied, You of little faith, why are you so afraid? Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were

amazed and asked, What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him! (Matthew 8:23-27)

Christ Our Stay Father Mitch Pacwa SJ (born 1949) is an American Jesuit. He earned his Ph.D. in Old Testament from Vanderbilt University as well as a Ph.D. in philosophy. He also holds other degrees and is an accomplished linguist. At this point he is a prominent host on EWTN – constantly displaying a remarkable general knowledge. In one interview on the “Vocations Boom” series he explained why he became a Jesuit. One reason was that when he was young he had a flair for stock market speculation, and he reasoned that if he were to be a priest (which he intended to be) he would have to embrace a priestly vocation which put him out of that temptation. So he became a Jesuit – with the vow of poverty, of course. *Christ*, and not stocks and money, became his *stay*. I mention him only to introduce another well-known character of his time, Robert Holmes à Court (1937-1990). Holmes à Court was born in Johannesburg but spent much of his early life in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). He was

educated in South Africa. There he earned money selling his schoolmates photographs he had taken of them, and by driving them home in exchange for their travel allowances. He was obviously entrepreneurial. He began his tertiary studies in 1957 at Massey College in New Zealand, graduating with a degree in agricultural science (forestry). He then moved to Perth in 1961, and took up the study of law at the University of Western Australia. He married on 18 May 1966, and was admitted to law practice on 17 April 1968 in Perth. Holmes à Court entered the corporate stage in 1970, when he acquired WA Wool – which he built up quickly and well. He showed great business acumen, and from there he began to gain control of a string of small businesses. He also enjoyed great success with horse-racing thoroughbreds. He went on to acquire Bell Resources, which amid ups and downs finally surfaced as Heytesbury Holdings. All up, he became one of Australia's most feared corporate raiders and the country's first businessman to be worth over a billion dollars. But what happened then? He suddenly died of a heart attack in bed on the morning of 2 September 1990 at the young age of 52, and was cremated

– going to his Maker with everything left behind to his wife and children. One thing we are reminded of by his story is that everything in this world is *very, very vulnerable*.

Our Gospel of today (Matthew 8:23–27) reminds us of the *vulnerability* and ultimate *uncertainty* of all created things. We cannot make the things of *this world* our *stay*. If we do, ultimately, for all our possible acumen and ability, we are being foolish. We read that *Jesus got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat*. The detail which we may notice here is that this sudden danger occurred *without warning*. That it was immensely serious is indicated by the words of our Lord’s disciples, men who were very experienced fishermen and familiar with the Sea of Galilee. *The disciples went and woke him, saying, Lord, save us! We’re going to drown!* They could have suddenly lost their lives and doubtless the history of the Sea of Galilee included many lost lives. Who would have predicted in the nineteenth century, the century that began with the terrible French

Revolution turbulence, followed by the Continental War spearheaded by Bonaparte, followed by other wars such as the Revolutions of 1848, the Crimean War, the French and Prussian conflicts and ending with the Boer War, that the *following* century would be so much the worse? The twentieth century saw two world wars, other major wars such as the Korean, Vietnam and Gulf wars, and conflicts innumerable in other parts of the world stage, to say nothing of the terrible persecutions perpetrated by the communist regimes of Russia, China and other similar regimes. It was all so unpredictable, sudden, protracted and appalling in its sufferings. The sudden storm on the Sea of Galilee may be seen as a symbol of the profound vulnerability of the created order, subject as it is to the effects of the original Fall. Who would have predicted the major threat now of extreme Islamic terrorism? Who would have predicted the tremendous cultural threat of Western moral and religious *relativism* – a dictatorship manifested in the passing of legislation mandating the acceptance of such disorders as same-sex marriage, abortion rights and doubtless worse deformations to come. The point I am making here is that all should be on guard against

making the things of *this world* their *stay* and *support*. This world is in no sense our true home. Our lasting peace and delight *cannot* be sought for *here*.

We must, as creatures who possess the gift of life, constantly look to the Source of life and true flourishing. That Source is the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ our Brother and our God. This brings us to the other great lesson of our Gospel today. Christ was asleep in the boat which was buffeted so seriously as to be on the verge of going down. But he was present, and the disciples should have had faith – this is what our Lord told them when he calmly rose to his feet to quell, with a simple word, the power and havoc of the storm. It may seem that Jesus Christ is absent from our difficulties and sufferings, be they of the individual alone or be they of the masses and the multitudes. Jesus Christ, by whom all things have their being and their life, is ever near even if he cannot be heard by us. We must place our faith in him and ever follow his word. If we do this, ultimately all will be well. This is the true answer to the *vulnerability* of all created things.

Wednesday of the Thirteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 5:14-15.21-24; Psalm 49; Matthew 8:28-34

When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. What do you want with us, Son of God? they shouted. Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time? Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs. He said to them, Go! So they came out and went into the

pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon possessed men. Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region. (Matthew 8:28-34)

The Venture of Faith

There is a slight divergence among the Gospels (Matthew 8:28; Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26) as to the name of the location of this dramatic exorcism by Christ. This reflects variations in the Greek manuscripts. St Matthew has it in "the country of the Gergeseenes," if we use the *Nestle* Greek Text. St Mark has it in the "country of the Geraseenes," as does Luke - if, again, the *Nestle* text is used. Various translations, such as the New International Version and the New American Bible, give "Gadarenes" as the English rendering (Matthew 8: 28). They appear to be using *The Greek New Testament* text, which has Gadareenes as the Greek. For the Catholic, it is somewhat resolved by the Church's own official translation of the

Greek, which is the *New Latin Vulgate* text – promulgated by Pope John Paul II. In respect to our passage today from Matthew (8: 28-34), the *New Vulgate* has "in regionem Gadarenorum," clearly relying on *The Greek New Testament* version. So the exorcism by Christ of the two demoniacs, as presented by Matthew, occurred in the country of the Gadarenes. Of course, it is not necessary to traverse these textual issues, but there is no harm in doing so occasionally as it helps us recall the materials we are dealing with. There are also divergences in some details as to what happened. In Matthew it is two demoniacs who are exorcised, while in Mark and Luke it is one. In all three, the demons are allowed to enter the swine which then charge into the water and drown. In all three, too, the inhabitants ask our Lord to leave. These agreements and slight differences are instances of textual variations among the manuscripts. Let us enter into the scene as St Matthew presents it (for his is our Gospel passage today), and notice one ominous detail. It is the response of the inhabitants. Our Lord has landed in the country of the Gadarenes, and if any blessing ever came to that district, it was his arrival. It was pagan territory, and here on the

shore was the Son of God made man. The demons knew that a terrible event for them was afoot. But it was to be a spectacular liberation for the one whom the demons held in bondage. Let us contemplate the scene.

It seems that on stepping on the shore, our Lord was forthwith met by two men coming from the tombs, men of frightening ferocity. It probably caused the Apostles to freeze in fright, and to stand near our Lord. There he stood, calm in his imperturbable strength. It is said that generally if a dog barks it is because it is frightened. The dogs that were the demons were barking ferociously, because they knew that the One before them was Master. They had come straight out of their sombre abode among the tombs to shout at the holy Power that was before them. Their shouts involved an arrogant yet frightened pleading. Why meddle here, you Jesus, you Son of God? This has been our turf! Have you come to annoy and torment us? And before the time? They assumed a blustering front, an unreal refusal to be humble, yet withal a helplessness before the defeat which they saw was

imminent. In this Man they saw an invincible host, a strength that meant their days in the area were completely numbered. Who knows how long the demons had occupied the region, of which the present possession was but a dramatic manifestation. We know what then happened. The demons, terrified at being sent into the Abyss, pleaded at least to be sent into the swine – for Jews, into filthy swine! With perhaps a touch of pity, Our Lord allowed it and into the swine they went, and into the sea they hurtled. The two men stood there, liberated and calm, with a new life ahead of them. Oh! The power of Jesus Christ, power that manifested mercy! This is what had arrived on the shore of the country of the Gadarenes, a boon beyond belief, good news beyond telling. But what was the sequence? The inhabitants came out, full of concern at what had happened. Strangely, they would have nothing of it nor of him. They did not want to go beyond what was familiar to them – beyond their comfort zone, as we would now express it. They refused to make any venture for something much better, the venture of faith in the One who had so signally shown that such a step would bring blessings beyond compare.

This is the danger in every life. We can so easily prefer what we are familiar with, which is to say the rut we are presently living in. Every day we are invited by our Lord to step forth and to follow him, wherever this might lead us. We do this in the daily duties, fulfilled with love for the One whose will they make present. On another occasion in the storm, our Lord summoned Peter to come forth from the boat and to approach him across the water. He began, but his faith failed and he sank. Let us resolve to have faith, to take the venture, to take our stand by the side of Jesus Christ. Let us not be like the Gadarenes in any way at all, no matter

A Second Reflection: (Amos 5:14-15, 21-24)

A God of Justice One of the distinguishing features of the God of the Israelites, when compared with the gods of the other ancient peoples, was that He required the utmost justice towards others, especially the poor and the needy (Amos 5:14-15, 21-24). The other gods required almost exclusive concern for their own divine rights, such as in ritual observance. In the prophet Amos, an exclusive concern for

ritual and a neglect for goodness, justice and compassion is condemned. Amos (8:4-6,9-12) threatens the severest sanctions against those "*who trample on the needy, and try to suppress the poor of the country.*" These words of God uttered by the prophet remind us of our Lord's description of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25. Christ the Judge will reward and punish according to our treatment of the least. He will say that whatever is done to them is done to Him.

This is the God we are called to love, serve, and imitate. Let us apply this to our everyday life and to all our dealings with others.



Thursday of the Thirteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

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Scripture today: Amos 7:10-17; Psalm 18; Matthew 9:1-8

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven. At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, This fellow is blaspheming! Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you

may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . . Then he said to the paralytic, Get up, take your mat and go home. And the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men. (Matthew 9: 1-8)

Sin It is recognized that one of the ablest of Anglo-Saxon philosophers was David Hume (1711-1776). He was important in the history of Western philosophy and is usually grouped with Locke, Berkeley and several others in the line of British empiricism. In his lifetime he was more known for his six-volume *History of England*, whereas his now famous philosophical works took time to make their great mark. This philosophical influence was beginning early in the next century, and when the young John Henry Newman wrote his defence of the miracles of Scripture in 1825-26, it was Hume's *Essay on Miracles* that he especially took account of. In his article, Newman chooses to allow Hume's observation that – as Newman paraphrases him – "*As the Deity discovers Himself to us by His works, we have no*

rational grounds for ascribing to Him attributes or actions dissimilar from those which his works convey" (Section II). This means that a miracle has no probability at all because it diverges so radically from our experience of the works of God in nature. Newman goes on to fault Hume for his notion of our experience of God, for we have a knowledge of God as active not only in the physical, but in the moral order. We perceive the realm of conscience, of duty, of sin, wrongdoing. There is a moral system that is just as real as the physical system, and God is the Author and Agent of both. I mention this here merely to introduce what is a natural human perception: *the perception of sin*. Man has, or can easily have, the natural perception that he sins. A full and properly developed moral sense includes not only the capacity to judge what is right and wrong, but the sense of *sin* and of having sinned oneself. This is not exactly the same as a sense of mere wrongdoing – that is, of having contravened, say, an ethical principle or a law of society. It is the sense of having failed to obey *God*. Granted that man is fallen in his moral life, it is to be expected that he will bear within him a sense of sin. If he has no sense of sin, he lacks a natural

perception – however endowed he may be in other ways. Indeed, it could be argued that this natural sense of sin is a natural basis for belief in God, for within a sense of sin there is, in the nature of the case, a sense of God.

The thought of the natural sense of sin, which ought be present in every man and woman, brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 9: 1-8). The friends of the paralytic brought the sick man to Jesus. He was helpless, lying on a mat. We are not told much, but the very first thing our Lord did was to forgive the man his sins. We could scarcely imagine our Lord imposing the forgiveness of sins on a person who was not sorry for them, or who had no sense of them. On another occasion he was dining in the house of a Pharisee, and a woman who had a bad reputation in the town entered the house and stood before him. She was weeping and her tears of sorrow for her sins dropped to his feet. She proceeded to wipe his feet with her hair ((Luke 7:47). He told her that her sins were forgiven, for, he said, she had loved much. The paralytic of our Gospel passage today must be presumed to

have had a consciousness of personal sin and a sorrow for them. It was on this basis that Christ, in the presence of all, told him to take heart. He then forgave him his sins. One suspects that, though the physical paralysis was a great affliction, the fundamental affliction burdening the paralytic was the thought of his sins. He may have thought – and perhaps with good reason – that it was because of his sins that he was suffering his paralysis. He may have thought that it was God's judgment on him. We do not know, but this thought of his sinfulness and his sorrow because of it was a very good thing. It meant that he was aware of his true situation, and it led to Christ bestowing on him divine forgiveness. This in turn led, by an act of Christ, to his deliverance from his paralysis. But the foremost affliction, and, it seems, the foremost thought of the paralytic, was his own sinfulness. In this, he was in touch with his true and broken humanity. He was a greater man for his sense of sin than he would have been without it. This goes dead counter to the modern image of the Admirable Man. The Admirable Man has no sense of sin, nor, therefore, does he have a sense of subjection to God. He is independent.

When we consider the heroes of popular culture and literature – and the characters of pop culture and movies – it is clear that the sense of sin is absent from them. This reflects the secular culture of our age, and has been with us for a considerable time. Life is lived with God being considered as absent. Therefore there is no sin. Let us look on the paralytic of our Gospel today as being, in a sense, our true ideal. We are paralytics all, especially in the realm of the spirit, and the greatest sign of spiritual paralysis is the delusion of there being no sin. Let us place ourselves in the presence of Christ, for paralytics we are, and he will raise us up.

A Second Reflection: Amos 7: 10-17

On Sin The great Pope Pius XII wrote that the sin of his century is the loss of the sense of sin. One of the features of the loss of the sense of sin is thinking that sin does not matter much, and that it is of little ultimate consequence. Now, one of the things that can help us to acquire a sense of sin is to reflect on what Scripture describes as the consequences of sin – that is to say, the punishments for sin – at times

in this life and certainly in the next. The prophet Amos describes (in ch.7: 10-17) the terrible consequences in their own very own time of his people failing to heed God's warnings, warnings uttered by himself. It would mean terrible death and destruction. We know that this is also an image of the ultimate and eternal punishment of hell.

Let us pray for a vivid sense of sin, its horror, and the awfulness of its punishment. Let us pray for the grace to be determined never to commit a deliberate sin, and if we do, to repent.



Friday of the Thirteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 8: 4-6,9-12; Psalm 118; Matthew 9: 9-13

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'? On hearing this, Jesus said, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the

sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'
For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Matthew 9:
 9-13)

Sin of The World

Consider the range of works that man sets himself to do. Some set out to conquer. Philip of Macedonia (359-336 BC) set out to reverse the lamentable situation of his country and had extraordinary achievements to his credit by the time of his assassination. He was about to take on Persia itself – something his much more famous son would do so successfully. Many others in history have set out to conquer others: Caesar, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Bonaparte. There have been those who gave their lives to unlock the key to the physical and chemical laws of the universe, and so lay the foundations for future technology. Others set out to alleviate physical distress and disease. Others set out to gain money and then to use it for good or bad purposes. There are an almost inexhaustible range of works that are open to man for his sojourn during life, and they spring from the original command to *"fill the earth and subdue it. Have*

dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth" (Genesis 1:28). But from the beginning there was an altogether fundamental work crying out to be done by someone, somehow. It was to heal, restore and completely fix the deep wound at the heart of visible creation, which was *sin*. How could *this* be done, and by whom? At the beginning God created the man and the woman. They were allowed to eat of any of the fruit of the garden in which he had placed them, except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which was in the very middle of the garden (3:3). They were forbidden to presume to "know" of themselves – i.e., independently to determine – what was good and evil. They were, rather, to subject themselves to the wisdom of God – under pain of death. If only they had obeyed God! But the woman "*saw that the tree was....desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it*" (3:6). They refused to be subject to God, and wished to be gods in their turn, determining for themselves what was good and evil.

The result of that single yet most serious rebellion was the unending catastrophe of sin. Sin entered the world through one man, and with sin came death, and death spread to the whole human race. The sin of the world had to be taken away, and the world had to be restored to communion with God. How could it be done, and by whom? In any age, if a massive work is to be done, the best man for the job ought be sought. But who could possibly do this job? It could even be said that the majority of people never identify sin as the fundamental problem. They do not know what really needs to be done. But God did know, and he knew the remedy. He must take the matter in hand himself and send his Son to do it – which brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 9: 9-13). Our Lord's task was, not to conquer temporal kingdoms – though he could have done that. His task was not to rid the world of disease and poverty and other temporal afflictions – though he showed concretely that he could have done that. His task was the most basic one of all, to take away the sin of the

world. In our Gospel today we see our Lord approaching those regarded as sinners, and making them his company. He even called one regarded by many as a sinner – Matthew – to be his companion in a special way. *"As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples."* Our Lord was showing that his business in life was to take away the sin of the world. Matthew was called to be an Apostle, and the Apostle's work would be to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sin to the ends of the earth. When our Lord was challenged by the religious leaders for associating with sinners, he said *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Let us understand very clearly the chief business of every day. The main thing to be done is to obey God in everything, and to

overcome and avoid sin. Of ourselves we would not realize that this is indeed the main thing in life, nor would we have the wherewithal to do it. But Christ is at our side as our Strength and our Redeemer. He comes to us in the Church's life, in her preaching, teaching and her Sacraments, and he comes to take away our sin and impart to us a share in his own holiness. This has begun in us by our Baptism. Let us carry it through, in union with Christ.

A Second Reflection (Matthew 9:9-13)

Sinners The Jews who challenged our Lord's disciples with the fact that our Lord dined with publicans and sinners had a certain notion of God, a notion that had its element of truth. Their notion was of an all-holy God who, because of his holiness, rejects sinners. Of course, ultimately the holiness of God is incompatible with sin, confirmed and unrepented sin. The confirmed sinner cannot remain in his presence, hence there is Hell. God's holiness requires that sin be renounced and indeed expiated. At the same time, God's holiness is a holy love. It is a love that is holy, and a holiness that is loving. He seeks out the sinner

and by his power strives to reclaim the sinner from his sin. So it is that our Lord said that he came to call sinners, and he, the all-holy God was happy even to have dined with them. The sinners our Lord associated with were sick, and they sought health from the divine doctor.

Let us place ourselves among those – sinners! – who sought the company of Christ. At the same time, thinking of those who are straying far from God, we should strive to have the mind of Christ. We ought show to them the holy love of God. In this way we make present to them the divine doctor healing the sick.



Saturday of the Thirteenth Week in Ordinary Time

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Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 9:11-15; Psalm 84; Matthew 9:14-17

Then John's disciples came and asked him, How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? Jesus answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. No-one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear

worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved. (Matthew 9:14-17)

The New Wine Our Lord speaks of himself as *new wine in new wineskins*. The *beginnings* of anything significant are often full of interest. The *beginnings* are a major theme in the myths and rituals of religions, including indigenous religions such as the Aboriginal religions of Australia. The beginnings of a great empire, such as the Roman, are most interesting and often become mythical. For instance, there are the myths of Romulus and Remus, who featured in Diocles of Peparethus's history of Rome (on which Fabius and Plutarch relied). There are the myths of the *Aeneid*, a Latin epic poem, written by Virgil between 29 and 19 BC. It tells the legendary story of Aeneas (a character in the *Iliad*), a Trojan who travelled to Italy, where he became the ancestor of the Romans. Numerous developments in history have contributed significantly to the life and culture of mankind,

and religious developments must be considered as being at their forefront. These too had their *beginnings*. Buddhism had its beginnings, as did Zoroastrianism, as did Hinduism and Islam. But the most significant thing that has ever appeared on the face of the earth – in view of what it *led* to – was the call of Abraham some 3800 years ago. This was a great *beginning*. The Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, the One whom the religions of man strove to know without realizing it, intervened and spoke to a humble migrant from Mesopotamia, then living in Haran. He told Abraham that he had a plan which would bring special blessings to all the families of the earth, and Abraham and his descendants were chosen to be part of that plan (Genesis 12:1-4, and Genesis 17:1). Abraham accepted this choice and determined to follow in faith and obedience the God who had deigned to reveal himself to him. This was the *beginning*, and it flowered into a great religion which transcended the religions of man because it was a true and not a merely mythical revelation. Great as were the insights of the Greeks, their tradition could not rival the loftiness of the divine inspiration of the Hebrew religion. Its moral insight, its conception of

the deity, its awful imperativeness with tremendous sanctions, its expectation of a grand Blessing to come, all of this dwarfed the Greek treasures when it came to the power to shape life. But the classical Hebrew religion of Abraham, Moses and the Prophets was not a stand-alone phenomenon, complete in itself. From its *beginning* it looked to a *fulfilment*. Its purpose was to produce a great Flower which would be the Aroma to pervade all creation and give to man his lustre. That Flower and that Shoot was Jesus Christ.

The *fulfilment* of all that God had *begun* was Christ. But this fulfilment was far more than was ever expected and this is because the long-awaited and long-predicted Messiah was not just a most extraordinary priest, prophet or king. He did not just transcend in human qualities all great individuals who had gone before him or who were to follow him. He was not just the greatest of the greatest of the sons of men. The essence of his utter uniqueness and the touchstone of the Christian faith was his *divinity*. He was and is *God*, while being truly man. As the Father said from the bright cloud on the Mountain, *to*

him, thenceforth, all were to listen. He is the God of the Old Testament, the same God who revealed himself to Abraham (“Abraham saw my day and was glad” – “You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?” – I tell you, before Abraham ever was I am”). He is the God who revealed himself to Moses, David and the prophets. We read in the Prophets (e.g., Hosea) how God describes himself as the *Husband* of his chosen people, and how his people are unfaithful to him. Accordingly, in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 9:14-17) Jesus Christ describes himself as the *Bridegroom* who is now with them. *How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.* This claim to divinity, to being *equal to God*, is a mind-boggling claim, an astounding revelation, and it is the key step in the acceptance of all of the mysteries of Christian dogma. But there is more. To say that Jesus Christ, the fulfilment of all the prophecies, is God is *not* to say (as might be presumed) that it is *only he*, Jesus Christ, who is the one and only God who revealed himself to Abraham and the prophets. He is indeed the one and only God, but he

is *not the only* Person who is this. He is the Second Person of *three* divine Persons, *each* of whom is the one and only God of Abraham and the Prophets. Who could ever have thought this up? A bunch of but moderately-educated fishermen in a backwater of the Roman Empire? The height and depth of the Christian system, so startling and so utterly beautiful, so complete an answer to the predicament of man and the world, so intellectually consistent and yet so far above in its mysteries the powers of human reason and so remarkably a fulfilment of the Old Testament, could only have come from above.

The *beginning* of the revealed religion of Abraham and the Hebrew prophets is to be located in the act of God. It was his work and it was destined to be *fulfilled* in a great blessing for all the families of the earth (Genesis 12). The bestowal of this blessing was the supreme act of God, and in the event it far transcended the prophecies. The Blessing was the Incarnate Son of God who began to dwell among us, as God-with-us. Every heavenly blessing is to be found in him, and he is our hope of glory. We enter into God's kingdom by becoming loving

and obedient disciples of Christ. This is what life is about, and it is *this* which is life and light for the whole world. It is as simple and as demanding as that. We know where Jesus Christ is to be found and how access to him is to be attained. He is found in his body the Church, the Church Catholic in union with the Successor of St Peter, and all the treasures of life in Christ are to be appropriated there.



Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 66:10-14; Psalm 65;

Galatians 6:14-18; Luke 10:1-12.17-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask

the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.' But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.' I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. (Luke 10:1-12)

God's Glory

Our Gospel passage today is one of many that could be cited referring to the kingdom of God. Our Lord came preaching that the kingdom of God was near. He gradually explained more and

more of this kingdom, its nature, its benefits and how one was to enter it and live in it. All the promised benefits of God were contained in this kingdom, and salvation lay in entering it and living as its citizens. In our Gospel today (Luke 10:1-12.17-20) Christ sends out his seventy-two disciples to announce the kingdom of God. It may seem a vague concept to the modern reader, and there is this about it that it is certainly broad and embracing in respect to the blessings of God. But what precisely is this kingdom — this rule or lordship of God — to which our Lord refers? Can we pin down its meaning and gain a clear notion of it? Now that the Redeemer has come, the kingdom of God consists essentially in the person of Jesus Christ and union with him. Jesus Christ and those who are in union with him make up the kingdom of God. The lordship of God extends to the extent that Christ's person and teaching spreads among men. Further, inasmuch as the Church is Christ's body and his locale in this world, the Church is the presence, the beginning and the seed of the kingdom of God here on earth. But now, let us reflect on the ultimate end of the kingdom of God. Its end is the glory of God, which is the salvation and life of

man. We are called to know, love and serve God here on earth, such that God will be honoured and glorified. To the extent that we give honour and glory to God by living in union with Jesus Christ, to that extent shall we be truly happy. God's glory is the path to man's happiness and perfection, and in that sense the glory of God is the purpose of his creation and redemption. The world and man were made to give glory to God, and this is the reason for the kingdom that our Lord announced and established by his death and resurrection. That is not to say that Christ has come in order to *increase* the glory of God, but to manifest it through the benefits he bestows on us. By being drawn into union with Christ and into the life of the Holy Trinity, our life becomes a praise of his glory, giving him glory.

We read in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* that “*the glory of God consists in the realization of this manifestation and communication of his goodness, for which the world was created*” (294). The glory of God was boundless from all eternity. But it was not a solitary splendour, the glory of a lone Person. The goodness of

the Father was manifested and given in its fullness to his divine Son from all eternity, and his Son returned love and praise to his Father for his infinite goodness. This was the Son's happiness to give praise to his Father, and this was the Father's glory, to manifest and communicate his goodness to the Son. Reciprocally, the goodness of the Son was manifested and communicated in its fullness to his Father from all eternity. Thus was the Son glorified in his being fully manifested to the Father from all eternity. The Father gave loving praise to his Son for his goodness, and thus was the Son glorified. In the same way the Holy Spirit was glorified from all eternity in the manifestation and communication of his goodness to the Father and the Son. Equally with the Father and the Son he was and is to be glorified. The *manifestation and communication of the goodness* of each to the other is the glory of God from all eternity. In a word, love is the life of the Triune God. So too, the world was created for the glory of God who wished, not to increase his own goodness, beauty and love, but to *show* it forth and to *communicate* it. It is in its manifestation and communication that the glory of God consists. The ultimate end of creation is that God, in

Christ, might be “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28) for his own glory and therefore our happiness. God created the universe freely with wisdom and love, as a manifestation and communication of his goodness. It is not the result of any necessity, nor of blind fate, nor of chance. God creates and sustains it from nothing. He gives it the capacity to act and leads it to its fulfilment through the redemptive and sanctifying work of his Son and the Holy Spirit. As St Irenaeus wrote, the glory of God is man fully alive, and man’s life is the vision of God, in this way giving glory to him. This is achieved by means of union with Christ.

The purpose of our being created and reborn in Christ — which is life in the kingdom — is to give glory to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In this lies our present and eternal happiness. This was the supreme purpose of Christ’s life, and it is the purpose of our life. We attain our purpose by life in Christ. Eternal life is this, to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Let us treasure and ever repeat that great prayer, Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to

the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.293-301
(for the glory of God)

A Second Reflection: (Luke: 10:1-12.17-20)

"The seventy-two came back rejoicing"

Joy Amid Suffering There are many things in life that are obviously blessings from God and that bring joy: our health, our very work, our family life and our friends. Not only are the God-given desires of our heart fulfilled by them, but in them we can find God. By means of them God sanctifies us, provided we serve God in them, and endeavour to remain in Christ. Consider the Gospel passage of today (Luke 10:1-12.17-20). The Lord sends out seventy-two of his disciples with work to do on his behalf. The seventy-two returned rejoicing. Their work and their achievements on behalf of our Lord brought them joy. Both the prophet (Isaiah) and the psalm (65)

reinforce this emphasis on the joy God intends us to have from the good things he gives us. “Rejoice, Jerusalem”, the prophet Isaiah says in the first reading (Isaiah 66:10), and the psalm responds, “Cry out with joy to God all the earth” (Psalm 65). The one dark element in all of this is suffering, and its companion, sin. Suffering will sooner or later be found in the experience of the good things of life God has given. For instance, our health — sooner or later we will suffer from ill-health. Suffering will be found in our work, if we are working according to the mind of Christ. Suffering will be found in family life, if we are living in Christ, and even if we are not. St Paul says that sin entered the world through one man, and through sin death, and death has spread through the whole human race. Death symbolises and embodies the suffering of mankind. Suffering is indeed a dark blight for it has the capacity to transform the good things of life into things we avoid, dislike, hate, and if we allow them, into obstacles to our relationship with God. Suffering can turn us away from God who is there, God who wishes to sanctify us in them. If we consider things

purely naturally, suffering can take away our joy, including our joy in God.

Now, consider the life and example of our Lord. We can imagine the joys of his years in Nazareth with Mary and Joseph, his public ministry with the wonderful things he did for so many and for his heavenly Father. But his greatest hour was the hour of his Passion and Death when he fulfilled the most important element in his Father's will. Yet in it he was bereft of everything except the cross, involving unspeakable suffering. Inasmuch as Christ's joy was drawn from his union with his Father, and inasmuch as the high point of his union with his Father's will was the Passion, mysteriously Christ's joy was at its deepest then, when all he had was his great suffering. This teaches us that suffering in the fulfilment of God's will is in no sense an obstacle to experiencing God's blessings, especially the supreme blessing of being in God with the joy this will bring. Christ's example proves it. When the disciples returned to our Lord rejoicing at the work they had done with its achievements, our Lord told them not to rejoice that

the spirits submitted to them. Rather they were to rejoice that their names were written in heaven. That is to say, they were to rejoice that they were in Christ, in union with Jesus and with the Father. This union and likeness with Jesus is at its highest stage when we suffer in the fulfilment of God's will. It is then that we are most like Christ, most in Christ, and he is most in us. It is then that we attain our greatest potential and fruitfulness, and our proof of this is the life and example of our Lord himself. St Thomas Aquinas once wrote that the Passion of Christ teaches us everything. We must pray increasingly for the grace to see this and to live it out. For this reason St Paul says Galatians 6: 14, *"The only thing I can boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world is crucified to me and I to the world."* The one thing St Paul was left with when he wrote those words was his sufferings. He knew that his conformity with Christ was especially real then, when he was left with Jesus and the cross.

What would happen if you were left with only Jesus and suffering? This prospect ought be considered, with the grace of God

and the example of our Lord before us, as a golden high moment when our life has its greatest potential. It is a moment when we are most conformed to Christ whose greatest moment was on the Cross. Let us pray for the grace to be able to say with St Paul, *the one thing I can boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*. It will be a great grace to have realised this, and will be the start of a true Christian maturity.



Monday of the Fourteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 2:16-18.21-22; Psalm 144; Matthew 9: 18-26

While Jesus was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before him and said, My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live. Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples. Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for

twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed. Jesus turned and saw her. Take heart, daughter, he said, your faith has healed you. And the woman was healed from that moment. When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, he said, Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep. But they laughed at him. After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. News of this spread through all that region. (Matthew 9:18-26)

Objective Truth There are so many things in life that are a source of wonder, and yet we barely give them a thought. This is one of the reasons why poetry can be said to be "useful," because it helps us to appreciate and marvel at things which we so easily take for granted. We take *love* for granted so very often. We take *beautiful scenery* for granted – and Wordsworth's poetry extolling beautiful scenes can help us recapture our appreciation of the *beauty* of the world. One thing which we routinely take for granted without much

reflection is the fact that we can *know* things. What is it to know the truth of something? Knowledge, involving both apprehension and judgment, is difficult to define, but it is a remarkable thing. It is quite different from mere awareness which, say, an animal has – though this animal awareness is remarkable too, especially if we remember that there is nothing spiritual about the animal. Inasmuch as an animal is purely material, matter has the potential for *awareness*, but not for *knowledge of the truth* as possessed by the human being. I make these passing observations simply to introduce the phenomenon of human knowledge. How vast is the range of human knowledge! Consider the libraries of the world and the civilizations of man – they are a tribute to knowledge of the truth. Now, let us take our Gospel scene today and consider the two persons who approached our Lord to gain his assistance. *We read that "a ruler came and knelt before him and said, My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live."* There were two things the ruler knew. He knew that his daughter had died, and he knew that if our Lord placed his hand on her, she would live. Both were things he *knew*. The former he had seen, the

latter he believed, but both he knew. The former he knew because of the hard evidence he had *seen* of his dead child. The latter, that Christ would raise her up at his touch, he knew because of his *faith* in Christ's power.

Faith, then, is a form of certain knowledge which is different from knowledge based on direct observation of hard evidence. The ruler knew our Lord could raise up his daughter because he trusted him completely. This trust was based on very good reasons such as general testimony and even what he may himself have seen our Lord do, but in the last analysis it was a matter of *trust*. He was not trusting anyone in the matter of the death of his beloved daughter. He had seen that for himself. His faith in Jesus Christ, was, though, knowledge of the truth. It was not, say, just a feeling. Religious faith is not just a religious feeling. It is *knowledge of the truth*. Or take the second personage who features in our Gospel, the woman who had long been ill. We read that "*Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his*

cloak. She said to herself, If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed. Jesus turned and saw her.” There were two things, we might say, of which this woman had a certain knowledge. She knew that she had been ill with her terrible complaint for twelve years. She knew this on the basis of her direct observation of the hard evidence. There was something else she had a certain knowledge of, and it was that if she but touched the garment of Jesus, she would be healed. This was a truth she knew for certain, and was just as certain as she was of her sickness itself. There was no doubt in her mind about this, just as there was no doubt in her mind about her sickness. But her certain knowledge of Christ's ready and complete power was based on *faith*. Her faith was not just a feeling she had. It was true knowledge of the active power of God present in this man Jesus. She had strong feelings about it, but in the first instance her faith involved knowledge of the truth. Because she had come to know – for good reasons – that Jesus could and would save her, she was healed. *“Jesus turned and saw her. Take heart, daughter, he said, your faith has healed you. And the woman was healed.”* Later in the house, the mourners laughed at our Lord – and

were put out. The ruler believed, and was rewarded by the gift of his daughter back to life.

The gift of faith is indeed a gift from on high. There are excellent objective reasons for the faith we have in Jesus Christ, but God's assistance is needed for us to perceive the true and full import of those good grounds that are before us. When Simon Peter professed his faith in our Lord as the Messiah and Son of the Living God, Christ told him that this had been revealed to him by the Father. Simon did not simply have a religious feeling about it. He had sure and certain knowledge of Christ, which others who did not have faith lacked. Our Christian faith gives us real knowledge of great Realities. The objective Truth constitutes the basis of religion, and that Truth is Christ.



Tuesday of the Fourteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47): 0-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 8:4-7.11-13; Psalm 113b; Matthew 9:32-38

While they were going out, a man who was demon possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel. But the Pharisees said, It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons. Jesus went

through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. (Matthew 9: 32-38)

No-one Like Him! Christ once said that a prophet is not without honour except in his own country. There is an old saying, that familiarity breeds contempt – a hyperbole that illustrates that we can easily underestimate greatness when we live with it. We read in our passage today that *"a man who was demon-possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke."* St Matthew describes the event in matter-of-fact fashion, and implies that the exorcism was an effortless procedure for our Lord. Let us notice, though, the response of the people. *"The crowd was amazed and said, Nothing like this has ever*

been seen in Israel.” In the history of the chosen people, there had been no equal to our Lord's doings. Matthew, constantly intent on situating our Lord against the backdrop of the Old Testament prophecies, is taking this remark of the crowd and obviously making it his own – under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Now, one of the features of our Lord's ministry is the scale of demon-possession that presents itself before him. There is nothing of this in any book of the Old Testament. In fact, in the whole of the Old Testament, Satan appears but rarely. There is the Serpent who tempted Eve at the beginning and who was condemned by God as a result. There is Satan who tests Job. There is no mention of a multitude of demons, nor do the Patriarchs exercise power over them, nor does Moses, nor do the prophets. In the Old Testament Satan is entirely subject to God, and any activity of his is subject to God's permission. If there is any battle with the demons going on, it is unseen and it is a matter between God and Satan. But from when Christ begins his ministry, the demonic realm is shown to be a kingdom in competition with him. It is as if the confrontation between God and Satan, his far weaker adversary, is now

manifested as being a matter between Christ and Satan. As with God, so with Christ, the demons are far the weaker. They angrily scurry before him and pathetically do his bidding. Let us not miss the great point that "*Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.*"

For the Christian, the reading of the Old Testament prepares him for the figure of Christ. It provides an emerging profile which is especially consistent with the Person who, in the fullness of time, appeared. The Gospels, though, show forth his uniqueness. However exalted the teaching of Moses (as in the Book of Deuteronomy, say), that of Christ far exceeds it. As John writes, Moses gave the Law, Jesus Christ brought grace and truth. However soaring the teaching of Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezechiel, or say, Hosea, Jesus Christ surpasses them all. Nothing like him had been seen in Israel. Apart from the content and character of his teaching, he eclipses his predecessors also in the intensity of his prophetic and missionary activity. Our Lord pronounced John the Baptist to be the greatest born of woman, and so as being the greatest of the prophets. But John's

ministry cannot be compared with that of Jesus Christ – even in terms of intense missionary activity. John remained at the river Jordan, and the people came to him. We read in our passage today that "*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field*" (Matthew 9: 32-38). Christ sought to reach all, and he founded and built his Church to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations. Being a disciple of his is the way to salvation, and the whole world is called to this discipleship. What other prophet attempted such a kingdom? He was setting out to conquer the world, and finally to hand the world over to his Father. The world, as subject to his lordship, was to be his kingdom. Nothing like this had been seen in Israel.

In fact, nothing like this has been seen in the history of the world. Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, is the Lord of lords and King of kings, and to him has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Just as he looked on the harvest ahead of him and wished to make disciples of each and all, so he wishes to make disciples of each one of us. Let us hear his call, then! Let us take our stand by his side as his disciples in real truth, and join with him in calling on all others to believe, and become his disciples in their turn. It is the way to heaven and to life hereafter.

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 9:32-38)

Starting Points It is an amazing thing that God himself became man and dwelt among his own, and then so many of his own did not accept him (John 1). In our Gospel scene of today (Matthew 9:32-38), our Lord has just displayed miraculous powers, delivering a dumb person of demon-possession and restoring his speech. The people were rightly amazed. And yet we read that the leaders of the people who were present did not accept him, choosing instead to interpret his power

as coming from the prince of devils, from Satan himself. It reminds us of the fundamental importance of a right attitude to Christ and all that he revealed. It is our *starting points* which largely govern our attitudes and our thoughts, and to establish the right starting points involves a serious struggle. Experience of life suggests that a person who lives in the darkness about Christ and his revelation, and who *chooses to remain so*, has little freedom to change this. There is a certain slavery about it.

So much depends on our hidden assumptions, our basic starting points that can be obscure and out of sight. Let us pray to God to give us the right starting points so that we will be open to his light, and able to bring it to others.



Wednesday of the Fourteenth Week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Hosea 10:1-3.7-8.12; Psalm 104; Matthew 10:1-7

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of

Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' (Matthew 10: 1-7)

The Mission There is a fashion that I have commented on before, of referring to Jesus Christ as having begun "the Christian movement." Some have even said that the Ebionites or perhaps the Nazarenes were the true fruit of the work of Jesus. There are scholars who regard Paul of Tarsus as being the real founder of Christianity. He it was who re-invented the Person and mission of Jesus Christ and gave to it the makings of a world religion. These distortions are in part the fruit of the rejection of dogma which, as John Henry Newman used to point out, is essential to Christianity. Christ began a structured institution with the power to develop in accord with its divinely-endowed constitution. He would be with it as its living head to the end of the world. He called it his "Church," and in the person of

Simon Peter its appointed rock (Matthew 16) and pastor (John 21), he gave to it the keys to the kingdom of God which he was establishing. Moreover, this intent became manifest from the outset. Immediately after our Lord's baptism he recruited chosen disciples. *Follow me*, he said to Philip, who in turn brought to him another, one in whom there was "no guile." Our Lord attracted great numbers, but he also sought out his disciples because he had a great mission ahead of him. We remember the rich young man whom he invited to leave all and to follow him. As we read in our Gospel today, he appointed twelve to be the foundation. Moreover, his Church had a stupendous mission with specific stages. While in our gospel today our Lord directs his Apostles to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," they would soon (Matthew 28) be directed to go to the whole world. John the Baptist alluded to this world-wide dimension when Jesus came for his baptism. Jesus was the one who would take away the sin of the "world." Christ himself said that he was the "light of the world." He said that when he was lifted up he would draw "all men" to himself. Risen from the dead, he told his disciples that they were to go

to "the whole world" and make disciples of "all the nations." Those who believed in him and his teaching as it came from the mouth of the Apostles would be saved. He was establishing not a mere movement but a very concrete, world-wide and eternal kingdom.

It is a plain understatement to observe that this was an extraordinary project. It was breathtaking. On our Lord's ascension into heaven, the disciples, and the Twelve in particular, found themselves with a mission like no other. Alexander had led his troops to the end of what they thought to be the known world – into Afghanistan and beyond the Indus. He finally halted near the Ganges River and because of a near revolt of his troops, headed back. The following century Carthage and then Rome began their expansions, Rome even reaching Britain – but it too called its halt at the borders of the countless Germanic and Scythian tribes. Jesus Christ founded a kingdom he meant to conquer the *world*. His disciples were to go to the *whole* world, and make disciples of *all* the nations, beginning in Jerusalem. He, unseen, would be at the head. But now, look at his

troops. They were ordinary men. Look at Simon his supreme commander, his representative, the one with power to bind and loose and who carried in his hands the keys to the kingdom. They were not dazzling generals, but seemingly ordinary persons. In this respect, let us notice one detail in the list of the Twelve that Matthew gives. It concerns himself – he is "Matthew the tax-collector." Matthew is saying, yes, I was chosen to be one of the Twelve, a Patriarch of the new People, the new Kingdom. But look at me - I was a mere tax-collector, a person of poor repute. He is the only person in the list whose occupation is given. His description of himself is followed by the open mention of the greatest shame of all, that of "Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him." The power behind the Institution was unseen. The One who would give the increase, the One who would bring forth the fruit, was the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one to whom had been given all authority in heaven and on earth. It is in him that the Twelve listed in our passage today would place all their trust in the prosecution of their unique and amazingly ambitious mission. Our

Gospel passage today is both soaring in its goals and consoling in its assurance.

Let us be spiritually regaled by the thought of the high mission into which, as baptized disciples of Jesus Christ, we have been drawn. I remember one newly-consecrated bishop publicly saying that his new mission was exciting. Our daily mission on behalf of Jesus Christ is exciting. At the same time it is utterly and completely beyond us – if we regard ourselves as alone. But while this is impossible to man, all things are possible to God. Jesus Christ is our head, and he leads the mission by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us fight with him then, and never lose heart!



Thursday of the Fourteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 11:1-4.8-9; Psalm 79; Matthew 10:7-15

Jesus said to his apostles, As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the

worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (Matthew 10: 7-15)

No Gold or Silver It is said that when Joseph Stalin was told that Pope Pius XII opposed his policies and, indeed, communism itself, he contemptuously replied, "and how many divisions has the Pope?" During the Second World War, through skilful restraint Pius XII maintained the power of papal prestige and was able to assist great numbers of hunted individuals. Nevertheless he was at the mercy of any sudden German intervention. He had, of course, no "divisions." Hitler was planning to arrest him and occupy the Vatican, and he could easily have done this had he not been persuaded from

doing so by advisers who were on the spot. In February 1798, French General Berthier marched into Rome and seized the Pope, who died away from Rome not long after. The next pope, Pius VII, excommunicated Bonaparte. He was then arrested, taken elsewhere and kept in confinement for some six years till Napoleon's crash. All of this illustrates the directions our Lord gave to his Apostles in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 10: 7-15), as he sent them ahead to preach that the kingdom of heaven was near. *"Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep."* Christ was sending them out as his warriors, warriors of the kingdom. But they were being given *no* gold or silver or copper, *no* bag or extra tunic – in a word, *no* worldly weapons to advance the kingdom. All they had was his word and his presence with them. Of course, material means would come their way but the method of victory was to be the Cross. They were to take up their cross every day and follow in the footsteps of the Master – and he

had seemingly been defeated! At the end of all his efforts, Christ hung dead on the Cross outside Jerusalem. The weapon of the Master was obedience amid suffering, bearing witness to the truth amid rejection, acceptance of the Cross amid seeming abandonment by God and man. The path to victory for the King of kings is poverty of worldly means and apparent defeat by enemies. But it is precisely this that leads to glory and victory.

It is essential for the triumph of God's kingdom that Christ's disciples be patient in the apparent poverty of their means. On September 12, 2006, in the academic quiet of the German University of Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI gave a profound lecture on the importance of reason in religious faith. Faith and reason are interdependent, and in his works God is rational. The most distinguished department of rhetoric in Germany, at Tübingen, later conferred on this address the award of "Address of the Year" in German. But Islam was in flames at the Pope's passing citation of a mediaeval dialogue and the Pope was left alone amid the thunder. He

had no divisions, only the Cross of Christ. He endured it patiently, and emerged with representatives of Islam at the table seeking regular dialogue with the Church – and that was scheduled to be a bi-annual event. There is a pattern in the Church's most authentic work. It is that if the word of Christ is to be obeyed and if his path is to be followed, the Cross will be the sword and shield to be used. That is the weapon the Master bore, and that is the weapon his disciples will be given. The temptation will be to let such weapons fall from the hand and to seize other weapons, the weapons of the world – praise, honour, convenience, wealth. The Christian must understand the way of Christ and be patient amid the difficulty that constitutes this way. In the famous *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* there is a Meditation entitled “The Two Standards” (“De Dos Banderas”). The one doing the retreat is asked to imagine a great field in the region of Jerusalem and in that field is the supreme Captain (“El summo Capitan”), Jesus Christ. Then the retreatant is asked to imagine a field in the region of Babylon where there is standing in his splendour the other great leader, Lucifer. Lucifer speaks to his minions, commanding that they tempt all

with the prospect of riches and honours – and in a word, pride. Jesus Christ speaks, and the path of his followers is to be spiritual poverty, actual poverty and humiliations. In a word, to use Stalin's expression, there are to be no (military) divisions. Victory will come from carrying the Cross.

The characteristic path of the Christian is that there is to be no *"gold or silver or copper in your belts no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff."* Of course, these words of Christ applied to a very specific situation of the disciples whom he was sending out ahead of him during his public ministry. But they are symbolic of the deeper reliance on Christ and his word rather than on the means that the world regards so highly. We must use the things of the world in accord with God's will and our particular vocation, but in and through it all, our true support is the presence, the power and the grace of Christ. Without this, all the other is nothing at all.

A Second Reflection: (Hosea 11: 1-4.8-9)

Our Loving and Holy God At times it has been said that the God of the Old Testament is a God of punishment, judgment and anger at sin. Whereas, it is said, the God of the New Testament is a God of love, tenderness and mercy. But we have only to read some passages of the prophet Hosea (such as that of 11:1 4.8 9) to see how simplistic such a statement is. In this passage God speaks of himself as a father full of love for Israel his child. He hates the thought of being angry at his child and punishing it, "*for I am God, not man.*" He characterises his holiness as a holiness of love: "*I am the Holy One in your midst and have no wish to destroy.*"

All this is more fully revealed in the New Testament. We must approach God as the one who is holy and who loves us tenderly, while at the same time, in our dealings with others, we must bear witness to His loving and holy mercy.



Friday of the Fourteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 14:2-10; Psalm 50; Matthew 10:16-23

Jesus said to his Apostles, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to

the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (Matthew 10: 16-23)

Difficulty When a company, university, government agency or department, or a corporation in society sets out to gain a big share of the market, it seeks the right people to do it. It advertises attractive pay and conditions and hopes to entice the best applicants. It does not blazon before all viewers the downside elements of the position – the stress, the precarious nature of the position if there is not a notable performance, and so forth. In fact, the successful applicant may be disappointed in what it turns out to be. In July 2005, after an extensive

search by Telstra, Australia's largest telecommunications company, Solomon Trujillo was appointed its chief executive with a salary of millions plus bonuses. There were high hopes and Sol Trujillo exuded confidence on his arrival from the United States. During the period of his tenure, Telstra's share price underperformed the market by around twenty percent, losing over \$25 billion in value while customer complaints rose 300 percent. Major factors in the company's share price decline were the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and being disqualified for submitting a non-compliant bid to the National Broadband Network tender issued by the Rudd Government. Four years into his appointment, Trujillo resigned and returned to the U.S., embittered. The point I am making is that the position involved great difficulty, and of course nothing of this was included in the job description because, probably, no-one foresaw it. Even if it had been foreseen, it would probably have been played down in order to get the best man. I have seen a similar lack of clarity as to difficulties and sacrifice in some programmes promoting vocations to the priesthood and religious life. But what does our Lord say to his Apostles about

their involvement in his mission? *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles"* (Matthew 10: 16-23). It will be a very difficult work.

This point should be borne in mind at the very outset of the Christian life. A non-Christian thinking of becoming a Christian ought be helped to see clearly that Christ does not call disciples to a soothing and comfortable life. There will be difficulty and trouble, and he himself is the exemplar. We read in Mark 8:34 that Jesus called the crowds to him together with his disciples – the crowds, and not just his disciples! – and told them plainly that *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* Did Socrates or Aristotle say such a thing to their disciples? We do not read in the book of Isaiah of that prophet saying this to his disciples, nor do we read of John the Baptist saying this to his disciples. We do not read

of Mahomet saying this to his followers, nor Buddha to his – in fact, Buddha's way was towards freedom from suffering. Our Lord makes it plain that difficulty and suffering is at the heart of the following of him. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means carrying the cross, and all knew and had seen what carrying the cross meant. This point would seem to be almost unique to Jesus Christ. Suffering is the terrible burden of man and it is the cause of much rebellion against God – just as rebellion against God was its primordial cause. But Jesus Christ has made suffering – that suffering that is associated with love for him and obedience to God – central to his way. There is no avoiding the issue of difficulty: *"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another."* There is one glorious element in this, and it is the constant assistance of the Spirit of God. *"But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father*

speaking through you.” The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ offered himself as a victim on the Cross. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that we shall do this too.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit, who is the Lord and Giver of life, to enable us to embrace the true way of Jesus Christ. That way is the way of the Cross. Somehow we must learn this, and it requires the grace of God. It is the true Christian mind, the mind of Jesus Christ which St Paul exhorts us to make our own. Let us begin by considering it. Let us pray to be able to appreciate it. Then let us set out on the path, accepting with gratitude the crosses that come our way and asking the Holy Spirit to guide us, to speak through us, and to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ.

A Second Reflection: Matthew 10:16-23

Witnessing to Jesus We often hear it said – or we *should* often hear it said – that all of Christ's faithful are called to bear effective witness to

the faith. This is a serious duty of the laity, and an essential component of being a "good Catholic". Yet so often we do not wish to do this. What is behind this reluctance? One reason is the seeming difficulty of the task in a very secular culture and society where religion is regarded as a strictly personal matter. So it is difficult. We can admit that, and our Lord often describes the difficulties that his own disciples will face in bearing witness to him, in their day and age. They were going out like sheep among wolves. But whatever be the difficulties in giving effective witness to Jesus, there is one great help that our Lord promises. It is the active involvement of the Holy Spirit: *"it is not you who will be speaking; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you."* This active involvement of the Holy Spirit in the witnessing work of the Church's members is described in the Acts of the Apostles. This brief Book describes the beginning of a 300-year process which culminated in the victory of the Faith over the Roman Empire. The Holy Spirit was the primary agent in this process.

Let us, then, depend on the Holy Spirit in the daily witness to Jesus that we are all called to give.

Saturday of the Fourteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 92; Matthew 10:24-33

A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his

master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. (Matthew 10:24-33)

Fear In his book, *Anglicanism*, the Anglican bishop Stephen Neill asks "how it came about that the King (Henry VIII) met with so little resolute opposition in the carrying out of his plans." Neill is referring

to Henry's break with Rome and his self-appointment as head of the Church in England. Sir Thomas More who, Neill writes, "was one of the greatest men and greatest Christians of his day," was one of the few who resisted. The first reason for the lack of resistance, Neill writes, was "the plain fact that Henry was a resolute and dangerous person" (Pelican, p.43). That is to say, it was fear of the power of the sovereign which – together with other factors – brought such a change to the religion of the nation. The king determined to break from Rome above all because of the "great matter" of his marriage, and fear of the king led to acquiescence. Fear is a powerful force in the shaping of the world and rightly so, because it is an essential element in the preservation of life. Everywhere in vegetative life, part and parcel of growth is the development of mechanisms of protection. Fear is manifest in the animal world: the turtle develops its powerful shell, and at the first intimation of danger, from fear it retreats into its own shell. There it is safe against the predator. Fear of threats is everywhere among insects, animals, birds, all. It is the response that protects the animal at risk. If it had no fear, its physical life would be destroyed. Fear also protects

the life of man, but in his case there are various dimensions of life. There is his physical life, his intellectual life, his moral life, his spiritual life. There is his life here on earth and there is his life in the world to come. He has the power to perceive what is of lasting and supreme importance, and to determine the threats to his eternal life and happiness. If he has sufficient perception, he will understand that a threat to his physical life is a grave thing indeed, but far graver is the threat to his eternal life. That threat comes from turning from God. Thomas More feared the threat to physical life, but he did not allow it to turn him from God because he feared the catastrophe of losing his friendship with God.

At various times in the Gospels our Lord exhorts his disciples not to fear in the sense of allowing their fear to master them. On one occasion they were alone in the boat on the Sea of Galilee, and it was a heavy sea. He came to them across the water, and they were terrified. He said, *Do not fear! It is I!* The fact is that fear can prevent us from doing what is right, and can lead us into doing what is wrong,

even what is gravely wrong. When Herod Antipas threw his great birthday party and invited the important people of Galilee to it, the daughter of Herodias danced in superb fashion. She caught the imagination of Herod and of his guests. Ask me whatever you wish, he bawled out. She made her horrendous request, and it was fear that led Herod to accede to it. He feared what his guests might think of him if he did not. So one of the holiest personages in the history of the chosen people was cut down and it was because of fear. Later, it was our Lord's turn. Pilate was for setting Christ free, just as Herod was for leaving John imprisoned. But as with Herod, so with Pilate, it was because of fear that he handed Jesus over to be crucified. He feared the reports that might reach Caesar of a turbulent and disturbed province, and of allowing to go free one whom the religious leaders accused of sedition and blasphemy. Pilate feared, and the result of his fear was the greatest misdeed of all time. God the Son made man was executed because of lies, which Pilate himself perceived quite clearly. He could see that it was only because of jealousy that the leaders had handed him over. The night before, Simon Peter had denied knowing our Lord

three times. This was because of fear. Our Lord, during his public ministry, had mounting threats all around him, but he did not accede to fear. In the Garden of Gethsemane he implored his heavenly Father to let the cup of suffering pass from him – but only his will be done. He sweated blood for fear. But he did not give in to fear. He controlled it, and surrendered himself to the Father. Christ is the exemplar for mankind of what to do about fear in the doing of what is right.

We can overcome our fear if we keep our sight on the higher reward, all the while asking for God's aid. As is well known, when Thomas More was awaiting the scaffold, he wrote, Even if I lose my head, I'll come to no harm! He had before him the blessings to come. When the Duke of Norfolk remarked to More that the anger of the king is death (*Indignatio principis mors est*), More replied that "*Is that all, my lord? ... Then in good faith there is no more difference between your grace and me, but that I shall die today, and you tomorrow.*" Let us every day keep our sights on the Last Things: death, the divine judgment, and heaven or hell.

A Second Reflection: Matthew 10:24-33

God's Judgment It is surely not difficult to realise the importance of God's judgment, if we understand that the stakes are eternal. Life is short and eternity is long, and eternity will be spent in heaven or in hell. When it comes to heaven, it is a bracing thought that there are higher and lower places in heaven. It is worth gaining a higher place if we shall be there forever. God's judgment is the great event that is to come. It is unavoidable and all important. There are many things that bear on our judgment by God, and our Lord tells us of one of them in our Gospel today (Matthew 10:24-33). It is the work of bearing witness to him in everyday life. According as we speak about our Lord before others, so will he speak about us before his heavenly Father: *"If anyone declares himself before me in the presence of men, I will declare myself before him in the presence of my Father in heaven. But the one who disowns me in the presence of men, I will disown in the presence of my Father in heaven."*

Just as the thought of a judgment can exercise the mind wonderfully, so can this stark warning about witnessing to Jesus. Leading an apostolic life in word and deed will make a difference to our eternity. We have our Lord's word for it.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall
behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 30:10-14; Psalm 18;
Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 10:25-37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. Teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life? What is written in the Law? he replied. How do you read it? He answered: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' You have answered correctly, Jesus replied. Do this and you will live. But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, And who is my neighbour? In reply Jesus said: A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he

said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert in the law replied, The one who had mercy on him. Jesus told him, Go and do likewise. (Luke 10:25-37)

Sanctity *'Master', the lawyer asked our Lord, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' The answer is daunting, even overwhelming. But if we remember the grace our Lord has won for us, it is a thrilling challenge for every day. 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.' Do this, He says, and life is yours. If our Lord says 'do this,' then the doing of it must be possible. It can be done. Of course, we cannot possibly do this of ourselves. But the good news of the Gospel is that Christ has won the grace for us that makes this possible. Due to the merits and the work of our Saviour, the Holy Spirit has been given to us at our Baptism and our Confirmation, and by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, who is the*

Spirit of Jesus and of the Father, we can aim to do what God has actually commanded us to do. God has commanded that we love Him with our whole being, and to show this love by doing his will and loving our neighbour for love of him. We do this by fulfilling our life's duties as well as we can, for him. That is to say, God has made it possible for us to seek to be hidden, humble, unknown *saints*. This gives to the life of each an immense dignity. Whoever we might be, however humble, however unknown or seemingly insignificant, and whatever might be our failures as others might consider them, we, all of us, have been entrusted with a great work for each and every day. That work is to *love God as perfectly as we can*. We may not have the talents or the opportunity, or the favourable circumstances to get to the top of our profession, but all of us have this great task, which is to love God with our whole being. When we appear before the judgment seat of God, we shall all be sitting for the same test, the test of personal holiness. God is not going to ask why did you not become the general manager of your company, or why did you not reach a six (or seven) figure salary. He will want to know why you did not love Him as much

as He commanded you to love Him. He will want to know why you did not even try to love him with your whole being, and why you chose to love other things instead – such as a big salary.

That is our common calling, and we should cherish this calling as we would an immense privilege. For a great many people, their profession or work in life is their pride. Our pride ought to be the calling we have received to love God with our whole heart. That is our first and foremost work in life. We should love this calling we have, and cultivate our sense of it. Our common vocation is to be holy. We should desire to love God with all our hearts, and we should cultivate this desire, preserve it and protect it, and make it a truly great desire, a desire that grows greater and greater as the days of our life pass. It is said that the sister of St Thomas Aquinas asked her brother how one becomes a saint. He is said to have replied: Really want it! We ought to grow in a great desire for holiness, for this is what God desires for us more than anything else. The desire should be greatest at the moment of our death when we surrender ourselves into the hands of the One we

have come to love. The test will always be our readiness to do God's will. Death itself, and the acceptance of it, will be the greatest test of our love, and it will be the manifestation of our love. For that reason our death will constitute our greatest challenge and opportunity in life. It was the supreme moment of our Lord's life, and we ought regard it as the supreme moment of ours. St Alphonsus once wrote that "if during life we have embraced everything as coming from God's hands, and if at death we embrace death in fulfillment of God's holy will, we shall certainly save our souls and die the death of saints.....Let us then abandon everything to God's good pleasure, because being infinitely wise, he knows what is best for us" (*Conformity To God's Will*, no.4). Amid great sufferings, we shall die in joy. What a wonderful thing it is to die in the way God wants, namely in perfect obedience to him and with perfect love for him. God wants us to love him with all our heart and all our being, and we show him this love by striving to conform to his will as perfectly as possible. This is the great work of every single day, and especially at the hour of our death. It is the work of now, today, tomorrow, right to the end. For this reason, in the "Hail

Mary” prayer, we pray to Mary that she will pray for us now, now, and at the hour of our death.

So then, let us decide – and it must be a personal decision renewed daily in our morning offering – to make holiness the quest of our life. It is God's command. The means to do this is obedience to his holy will. Obedience to the will of God is the test of love for Him. This is expressed in the loving fulfilment of the daily duties of one's state in life. Let us make that our daily goal.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 10:25-37)

Christ the Good Samaritan In our Gospel passage today a lawyer asks our Lord what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Christ asks in his turn, *"What is written in the law?"* The lawyer replies, *"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself."* *"You have answered right,"* says Jesus (Luke 10:25-37). That command of the Law provides us with a revelation of Jesus

Christ. *"I have come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets,"* our Lord says elsewhere. The command of the Mosaic Law is fulfilled in our Lord's own person. The lawyer continues, *"And who is my neighbour?"* Once again, our Lord's answer, in which he describes the Good Samaritan, gives us a revelation of himself. *"A man was once on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of brigands; they took all he had, beat him and then made off, leaving him half dead."* That man who was left half dead is a picture of every man and woman, and of the human race lured into sin by Satan. It is left half dead in sin. Adam fell from original grace and in him we all fell, being subject, as St Paul says, to the power of sin and of death. Of ourselves, we are profoundly wounded by our own sins. Nothing and no one can help us but God, and this he did with astounding generosity. He sent his Son to be our Good Samaritan. Contemplate the Good Samaritan of the parable – his gentleness and attention to the detail of the battered person's needs. *"He went up and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him on to his own mount, carried him to the inn and looked after him."* He helped this person at the personal

cost of his time and money: The next day he took out two denarii and handed them to the innkeeper. "*Look after him,*" he said "*and on my way back I will make good any extra expense.*" The Good Samaritan is a symbol of our Lord himself and all that he has done for us, his tenderness and attention to the detail of our needs, especially our spiritual needs.

The Good Samaritan was a foreigner to the one left half dead. He could not be expected to put himself out very greatly. But he did. Who would have expected God to put himself out at great personal cost to himself in order to rehabilitate his creatures, who through their own fault had squandered and dissipated his gifts? Inasmuch as, in the words of St Paul in the second reading from Colossians, Christ Jesus is the image of the unseen God, the Good Samaritan is not only a symbol of Christ our Redeemer, but also an image of the Father who constantly tends our wounds. In a different passage, our Lord describes the Father as the vinedresser, Christ himself as the vine, and we as the branches. The vinedresser is continually tending us who are the

branches in order to make us bear good fruit, fruit that will last. Both Christ and the Father look after us constantly. Not only do our Lord's words in today's Gospel tell us of himself and the Father, but they throw light on our condition as sinners. They also indicate the path we are to follow. The Good Samaritan is a pre-eminent inspiration for our daily behaviour and life. Like Christ, like God our Father, we in our turn are to be a gentle and sensitive neighbour to all those whom we see to be in need. One of the most beautiful of modern papal Encyclicals was the second one that Pope John Paul II wrote some two years into his papacy. It is entitled, *God Rich in Mercy*. It was an exposition of the mercy of God, that mercy which the Good Samaritan portrays. In that Encyclical the pope wrote that all members of the Church are to bear witness to the mercy of God by the mercy they constantly show to those in need. The Good Samaritan is a model for each member of Christ's faithful, and a model for the entire Church. It is also a model for all of society. Years ago I knew a member of the Social Sciences department of Sydney University who chose to do his PhD on the figure of the Good Samaritan as a model for social service institutions in society at

large. Indirectly he was taking Jesus Christ as the model for social action in society.

Let us think of the needs of our fellow man: his need for friendship, his need for a holy example of Christian living, his material needs, all his needs and most especially his spiritual needs. Man needs God above all. God, the Creator of the universe, is the Good Samaritan – he is a true Gentleman. Christ is the image of the living God, the Good Samaritan of mankind. By the power of the Holy Spirit let us resolve to be Good Samaritans to those in need everywhere.



Monday of the Fifteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 1:10-17; Psalm 49; Matthew 10:34-11:1

Jesus said, Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter in law against her mother in law-a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or

daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward. After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. (Matthew 10:34-11:1)

Christ Above All

Let us take any one of our Lord's predecessors in the prophetic tradition of the chosen people. Let us ask if that prophet, holy man or inspired leader would expect what our Lord expects of his disciples in our Gospel passage today. Our Lord states that "*anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy*

of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Our Lord plainly affirms that he is worthier far than any other person in our lives, more so than anyone we would naturally love, anyone who has the greatest natural claims on us. No-one in all the Scriptures made such claims. Consider Abraham or any of the patriarchs. The woman whom our Lord met at the Well of Sichar referred to "our father Jacob" (John 4:12) and asked if he, Jesus, were greater than he. Consider Moses, David, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah and the other great prophets. They had their disciples – Isaiah directs that the record of his words of prophecy be folded and his sealed instruction be kept among his *disciples* (8:16). But none of them would have demanded the devotion to his Person that Jesus Christ requires. Our Lord expects full acceptance of his teaching and total acceptance of his Person, and this because he is worthy of it. Anyone who does not give this, is not worthy of him. He does not come simply bearing the fullest revelation of God's plan. His divine Message is not the only blessing he brings. He brings himself, and in his very Person we are granted every

heavenly blessing, as St Paul puts it. He, then, is the greatest treasure of man, and to possess him is to possess more than any other possible treasure in life, no matter how dear. It is plain that our Lord is speaking with full consciousness of being divine. *"For I say to you that many prophets and kings have desired to see the things which you see, and did not see them; and to hear the things which you hear, and did not hear them"* (Luke 10:24).

Our Lord promises that if we "lose" our life for his sake, we shall find it. *"Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."* The Kingdom, then, is Jesus Christ and union with him, and we must be prepared to forego all in order to possess him. Our Lord told the parable of this kingdom. *"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found, and hid. In his joy, he goes and sells all that he has, and buys the field. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who is a merchant seeking fine pearls, who having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it"* (Matthew 13:44-46). But this

absolute devotion to Jesus Christ does not separate us from others, least of all those who are most dear or for whom we have serious responsibilities. Our love for Jesus Christ, in his own divine plan, is to be immediately translated into loving service of neighbour. *"Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward"* (Matthew 10:34-11:1). Our Lord attacked the scribes and Pharisees for rendering void the commandment of God to honour and assist one's parents by their rule of Corban. *"Moses said, 'Honour your father and your mother; and, He that speaks evil of father or mother, let him die': but you say, 'If a man shall say to his father or his mother, That by which I may have helped you is Corban,' that is, Given to God; you no longer allow him to do anything for his father or his mother; making void the word of God by your tradition, which you have delivered: and many such like things you do"* (Mark 7:1 13). The final Judgment will

be determined by our service of those in need – and our Lord will say that what was done to them was done to him because each of them is his brother or sister (Matthew 25).

So then, the Christian must clearly understand in what the Christian religion consists. It consists in loving Jesus Christ with all one's mind, heart, soul and strength because he is both man and God. Secondly, it consists in loving our neighbour not only as much as we love ourselves, but as Christ has loved us. This is the magnificent and the difficult vocation of the Christian, impossible for man but not for God. That is why God sent his Son to take away the sin of the world and to endow us with a share in his divine life by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Every day is an adventure, the adventure of love. Let us strive for the perfection of love, then!

A Second Reflection: (Isaiah 1:10-17)

Morality and Religion If we consider the characters in the popular fiction of the last century – for instance, some comic strip characters

such as Tarzan, Superman etc. – we notice that these characters are moral but not religious. God does not feature in their lives but morality does (and I am not thinking of characters of the very recent past, such as in the James Bond character, who in debonair fashion is not even moral). We know from Revelation that morality *without religion* is not fully pleasing to God, for the *first three* commandments require religion, which is to say, love and devotion to God himself. But there is an opposite error. There is the danger of being so called "religious" but not moral. That is to say, there is the real possibility of being concerned for one's relationship with God, with prayer and elements of worship, and being unconcerned with serious deficiencies in one's moral life, for example in right behaviour towards others. And non-religious people point this out and dismiss religion because of it.

The prophet Isaiah condemns this (1:10-17). God is a God of justice and morality – not like the gods of the pagans that required little more than religious observances. The living of our religion involves, while being more than, a life of high and faithful morality.

Tuesday of the Fifteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall
behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go
astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the
faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever
is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it
honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns
with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 7:1-9; Psalm 47; Matthew 11:20-24

*Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles
had been performed, because they did not repent. Woe to you,
Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed
in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented
long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable
for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you,*

Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you. (Matthew 11:20-24)

Repentance Every discipline of study has its interest, but one of special, important and general interest is history. A person may have little understanding of physics, but if he has little knowledge of history then that is truly unfortunate. It is important that he start to read some history – the history of his own country and culture, of his own civilization, and then as his interest may lead him. If his bent is science, a knowledge of the history of science will be useful. It is a good thing if a person who reads history can reflect on the more general dynamics of history – on the fundamental factors shaping the history of man and his world. There have been various proposals in respect to this. Marx proposed that the conflict between two classes – labour and capital – is the basic dynamic, and that this is resolved according to

Hegel's law of struggle (as modified and applied by Marx). Hegel's law was that the situation which is in possession (thesis) is opposed by its opposite (antithesis), and the struggle resolves into a new situation (synthesis) which becomes the seed-ground of further struggle. Marx saw the ultimate resolution to lie in a classless society. That, broadly, was Marx's philosophy of history. Apart from its enormous over-simplification, it forgets the centrality of the *moral* struggle within the *individual* person. I do not refer simply to the struggle for whatever is "ethical" – whatever, fundamentally, that may mean. The basic struggle for each person is not his struggle with his oppressive bosses, nor even his struggle against whatever is "unethical" around him, but his struggle against *personal sin*. Sin is the dominant oppressor, and the question is, what is the dynamic, the key, the means to win *that* struggle? The root problem for man is his alienation from God and disregard for his law. This is what man is by nature prone to, and it has been revealed by God that of himself he cannot prevail in the struggle to make this right. Man discovers himself to be a sinner, and sin radically affects the course of history. Any philosophy of history must

negotiate the question of *sin*. More importantly, the question must be resolved.

In our Gospel passage today our Lord denounces whole cities for their failure to confront this fundamental problem. There are at least two things our Lord makes clear about this. Firstly, sin is a principal factor in the shaping of human history, and it brings on serious consequences. Secondly, the way to confront it is by personal repentance. *"Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you."* Tyre and Sidon fell because of sin, our Lord is saying. Because of their sin, they were judged and condemned by God, and this condemnation included their downfall in history. Their course would have been different had they repented. So then, Korazin and Bethsaida

were on the path to woe because of their sins. Their only means of avoiding this path was repentance, and this they were refusing to do. It was the same with the town of Capernaum which boasted of being the residence of Jesus Christ himself during his public ministry. They did not believe in him, and they refused to change. They would not repent. Our Lord directs a terrible warning to them: "*you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you*" (Matthew 11:20-24). Repentance, then, is the decisive act for sinful man. That is the key. Simon Peter denied our Lord three times despite the signal favour he had been shown. But he repented and went on to sanctity. Judas Iscariot betrayed our Lord, despite the exalted vocation that was his as one of the Twelve. If only he had repented! If he had, he too would have gone on to sanctity and probably martyrdom. He did not repent.

Man's fulfilment of his vocation depends on repentance. He is a sinner by nature, for his nature is fallen. He is restored to grace by Baptism, but his inclination to sin remains. This is the struggle ahead, and it is the struggle for all mankind and society. Marx had no idea of this. Grace is given man to enable him to gain the victory, and it is imperative that he mount the struggle every day. Repentance is the key. He must repent every day of the smallest deliberate sin, starting ever again. It is through repentance that he will carry the day.

A Second Reflection: (Isaiah 7:1-9)

Fear Consider the intervention of the prophet Isaiah. A great crisis faces the city of Jerusalem. Aram and Pekah are advancing against it. The *"heart of the king and the hearts of the people shuddered as the trees of the forest shudder in front of the wind."* And what happened? God sent the prophet to tell the king to *"keep calm, have no fear, do not let your heart sink because of these two smouldering stumps of firebrands."* They were not to fear. It is useful to read the passages throughout the Scriptures in which God tells man not to

fear. Our Lord often tells his disciples not to fear. We remember his words to them during the storm on the Lake. God wants us not to be troubled. It is different for those who are not heeding the voice and commandments of God. They have every reason to fear. As the prophet says to King Ahaz, speaking in the name of God: "*But if you do not stand by me, you will not stand at all.*" The premonitions of conscience and the words of our Lord in various passages of the Gospel, such as in Matthew 11:20-24, make this clear.

So then, let us trust in Jesus, and fear to commit sin.



Wednesday of the Fifteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall
behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go
astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the
faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever
is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it
honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns
with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 10:5-7.13-16; Psalm 93; Matthew 11:25-27

*At that time Jesus said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,
because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and
revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good
pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one
knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except*

the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matthew 11:25-27)

The Knowledge of God John Henry Newman's principal interest was the Christian encounter with unbelief and its claim that Christian dogma flies in the face of reason. Newman probed the true meaning of "reason" and endeavoured to show that reason under the guidance of conscience should lead to faith, while insisting that faith is a step that goes beyond mere reason. He also pointed out that a great deal depends on one's fundamental assumptions. 120 years after the death of Newman, an important British philosopher died, one who was notable for his works on the philosophy of religion. Antony Flew (1923 - 2010) was of the analytic and evidentialist schools of thought, and argued that one should presuppose atheism until empirical evidence of a God is produced. He also criticised the idea of life after death. So his *assumption* was that one should begin with atheism, and his further assumption was that empirical evidence is always required for the verification of a truth. But the immediate question that occurs to the

observer is, why ought *this* be assumed? By way of aside, another example of a striking assumption was that made by Rene Descartes. The first and only indisputably perceived fact, Descartes assumed, was that "I think." Because I think, I therefore know for certain that I exist. My existence is an acceptable deduction from the basic fact that I think – *cogito, ergo sum*. But now, if all I have to start with is my awareness that I think, how am I to get out of my thinking to the reality of that about which I am thinking? Descartes was a religious man, but his philosophical theory contained the seeds of religious agnosticism because it cut away at the grounds of certitude about the objective world. Newman was right in speaking of the paramount importance of right starting points – and these must be our *natural* starting points. We *naturally* sense that there is an objective world. We naturally sense there is a God, even if we find it difficult to cast this sense of things into a convincing syllogism. We ought start there, and try to find its justification. But let us continue with Flew. On the basis of his starting points, most of his working life was spent in writing on the non-existence of God. Over the years, though, the argument from

the finality of things began to have sway with him. In January 2004 he informed his friend and philosophical opponent, Gary Habermas, that, to the disgust of other atheists, he had become a deist.

Now, Flew was a very intelligent man and lived a long life. But how far did he get? He finally got to being a deist. One cannot but be happy for his sake that he reached the point of accepting that there is a God according to the deist notion, but how is this to be compared with the ordinary Christian believer who lives her life deeply in love with the holy Trinity? A child is born to a farming family in a remote district, with little opportunities for education. She is baptized and receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. From an early age she displays a notable Catholic faith. She prays and lives a good life as she is growing up. She has only a primary school education. Though Mass is celebrated only once a month in her farming district because of its remoteness from the parish centre, in her teens every Sunday she gets on her horse and rides to where Mass is celebrated. She loves God and has a knowledge of him nourished by revealed truth as presented in the

Catechism, in the Gospels, and in the preaching of the Church. Her family is religious and the knowledge of God passes on to her through family prayer, family example, and above all through the action of grace in her soul. It becomes the basis of her life. She is a contemporary of Antony Flew, just a little older perhaps, and she dies within a year or two after he, full of faith in God and her religion. All her life she has been sensible, and fulfils her vocation as wife and mother. From early years God has been the principal reality of her life, and of course, she far outstrips Flew in her knowledge of God. Flew finally reached deism, and many cheered to see it. Habermas was especially gratified. But Flew was far behind so many of the little ones, the "little children," as our Lord refers to them in today's Gospel passage. They are ones who are the beneficiaries of the grace of God, the ones to whom the Father reveals the Good News of Jesus Christ and his Church. *"At that time Jesus said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure"* (Matthew 11:25-27).

Let us, together with our Lord himself, praise and thank our Father in heaven, for what he had deigned to reveal to us his little children. This was what it pleased him to do. He has given us the grace of Baptism and membership in his Church, and with that has endowed us with the knowledge of him and his divine Son and the Holy Spirit. We are children of God, temples of the Holy Trinity, blessed with his divine Revelation, and marked out for heaven – if we are faithful to what we have been taught and know. *Eternal life is this*, our Lord said at the Last Supper, *to know you, Father and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*. Let us treasure this saving knowledge of him, then, and bring it to others. It gets us to heaven.

A Second Reflection: Matthew 11:25-27

The True Possession: One of the instinctive tendencies of every man is to possess, to have, and to have as much as possible. Animals have this tendency too, in their own way. But man can aspire to possess an enormous amount, far beyond his necessities. St Ignatius Loyola asked Xavier, *what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to ruin*

his very self? Thinking of this kind of question, many adherents of various non-Christian religions have divested themselves of many possessions. God means us to possess great riches: he means us to possess *Christ*. Our Lord says in Matthew 11:25-27 that everything had been entrusted to him by his Father. He was and is "rich", and he means us to be "rich", but in him. In possessing Christ we possess everything of value. For this reason St Paul says in one of his letters that in Christ we possess every heavenly blessing.

Let us aim to possess everything by possessing Christ, for to gain the whole world and to lose Christ is to gain nothing, and to have nothing.



Thursday of the Fifteenth Week in Ordinary Time

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behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

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honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns
with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 26:7 9.12-16 19; Psalm 101;
Matthew 11:28-30

*Jesus said, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will
give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am
gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For
my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)*

Light and Rest

I remember speaking to a well-educated retired journalist who had studied at tertiary level. He was not especially religious but respected the Catholic religion. I was interested to hear his impressions of philosophy. He more or less thought that much of philosophy, when pursued by persons without revealed religion, was bizarre. I am afraid that he was right. Major philosophers – major in their influence on thought – have held intellectual and published positions which the ordinary person would think simply lack common sense. George Berkeley (1685 – 1753), Anglican Bishop of Cloyne, was a good man who, together with his contemporary fellow philosopher Bishop Butler, is honoured with a feast day in the liturgical Calendar of the U.S. Episcopal Church. He maintained that individuals cannot think or talk about an object's *being*. Rather, they think or talk about an object's being *perceived* by someone. That is, individuals cannot know any "real" object or matter "behind" the object as they *perceive* it, which "causes" their *perceptions*. He thus concluded that all that individuals know about an object is their *perception* of it. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer called Berkeley the father of

idealism. In reference to Berkeley's philosophy, his much younger contemporary Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709 - 1784) kicked a heavy stone and exclaimed, "I refute it thus!" That is to say, we know that we can know things as they are in themselves, something Bishop Butler would never have dreamt of questioning. I mention this as an example of the bedlam of voices filling the halls of learning throughout history, all claiming to offer light to mankind. When one reads in the field of the history of philosophy, it becomes abundantly clear that man needs a Light. We need a Light because there is a great deal of error, and this error cannot bring rest to weary man. It is truth that his mind yearns for, and he knows that it is the truth which will bring him the rest he desires. But, as Pilate said to Christ, *what is the truth?* – and, we may add, where is it to be found?

Jesus Christ said that *he* is the Light of the world. Anyone who walks by his light will indeed be living in the light, whereas the one who does not will be in the darkness. Nearly a century after the death of Berkeley there was born in the small town of Röcken, near Leipzig,

in the Prussian Province of Saxony, one who would have significant influence on the thought of the twentieth century. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844 – 1900), whose influence has been within and beyond philosophy. Nietzsche radically questioned the value and objectivity of truth, and one of his key ideas was the death of God. He finally lost his mind some eleven years before his death. Nietzsche's thought, which has been quite influential, led himself and others into darkness, and is a prime instance of the need for the Light of Jesus Christ. Even if we turn to the best philosophers of the past, ones who left a wonderful legacy of thought, the need for a divine light is evident. With good reason Aristotle was called "The Philosopher" by St Thomas Aquinas. He became a principal resource for Aquinas in providing a philosophical perspective in approaching revealed truth. But still, Aristotle's notion of God is a signal instance of man's need for light from God. Further, without the light of truth, how can man find peace? This "rest" is exactly what our Lord offers as the Light of the world. *"Jesus said, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and*

humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Man yearns for rest, and Christ promises it. He says to weary and burdened man – such as Friedrich Nietzsche and those tempted to embrace thought such as his – that if you come to me and take on the yoke of my teaching and follow in my footsteps, you will find rest. Modern man, so burdened with the problem of evil and suffering, ought hear our Lord, come to him, consider giving him a real try, and then, asking the grace of God, take the plunge of faith.

How beautiful is the life of one who from earliest years has taken his stand with Jesus Christ, and through all the difficulties of life has followed his light. He has learned from him. His teaching is the foundation of his life and endeavours, and whatever discipline he has pursued in life has always been approached with the mind of Jesus Christ. *Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*, St Paul wrote. It is the key to the world's problems, and the pathway to glory.

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 11:28-30)

The Yoke of Christ Many great minds have commented on the scale of evil and human trouble there is in the world. Cardinal Newman in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864) wrote that were it not for the testimony to God coming from his conscience and certain other sources, the fact of so much evil in the world would lead him into atheism. A statement like this coming from such a one (raised to the Church's altars), ought lead us to sympathise with those labouring under the problem of evil. Our Lord states that the answer to the burden of life and reality is to come to Him. "*Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28-30). Our Lord addresses this invitation to all who are overburdened, not just to some of his disciples. He promises to give them rest if they "*shoulder my yoke and learn from me*". So shouldering his yoke – taking up the burden arising from being his disciple – will lead to rest and happiness. The cross of Christ is the path to joy and glory.

This is the path for each of us to travel in an evil and suffering laden world. The path is one of being in Christ. It is the path to announce to others, especially those who because of evil, are tempted to reject God.



Friday of the Fifteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall
behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go
astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the
faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever
is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it
honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns
with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 38:1 6.21 22.7 8; Psalm: Isaiah 38;
Matthew 12:1 8

*At that time Jesus went through the cornfields on the Sabbath. His
disciples were hungry and began to pick some ears of corn and eat
them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, Look! Your
disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath. He answered,
Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were*

hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread- which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. (Matthew 12:1 8)

The Lord Our scene today is that of Christ passing through the cornfields with his disciples on the Sabbath. The synagogue service may have been over, or even yet to come, for a few verses later Christ enters the synagogue. We read that his disciples were hungry and began to pick for themselves some ears of corn to eat. There must have been others nearby and among them some Pharisees, who immediately approached our Lord with their complaint. His disciples were violating the Sabbath rest, which together with the synagogue service was the linchpin of the religious practice of the nation. The Scriptures

proclaimed that the Sabbath day had to be kept holy. One of the features we notice in the debates between our Lord and his adversaries was Christ's dexterous command of the entire Scriptures. He was continually revealing new treasures of teaching in them. On one occasion he was confronted by the Sadducees who refused to accept anything beyond the Torah (i.e., the Pentateuch) as being inspired. Accordingly, they did not accept the doctrine of the resurrection. So they posed their puzzle to our Lord of the woman who had had seven husbands. Our Lord immediately turned the tables by quoting, from the book of Exodus, words from God himself to the effect that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were still alive. So there was a resurrection from the dead, even accepting only the Torah. On another occasion he quoted a psalm suggesting that the Messiah was not only Son of David, but David's Lord – how could this be? He was alluding to his divinity and to the Incarnation. In our encounter today (Matthew 12:1-8) our Lord refutes the Pharisees' Sabbath rigidity by appealing to the example of their forefather David who took and ate bread on the *Sabbath*, and in the house of God itself. And, after all, in preparing the

offerings of the lambs the priests themselves violate the Sabbath rest, and in the very Temple. How much more ought his critics respect what *he* allowed, for "one greater than the temple is here." So in passing, our Lord claims to be greater even than the Temple, the house of God!

Jesus is greater even than the Temple! Now, the Temple was the greatest thing in the nation – while Herod built temples to the gods of various gentile populations, his architectural marvel was the Temple of Jerusalem. It was one of the great buildings of the ancient world. It must have reinforced the sense of the transcendent importance of the Temple of Jerusalem in the life of the nation, signalling to all and sundry that Yahweh, who dwelt there, was supreme. But our Lord says that *he himself* is a greater dwelling place of Yahweh God than is the Temple. "*One greater than the Temple is here.*" Further, in the matter of the Sabbath, he is its *Lord*. Lord of the Sabbath, too! Greater than the Temple and Lord of the Sabbath, our Lord's masterful use of the Scriptures continues. The Pharisees, he says, *must go and learn the Scriptures*. Elsewhere he accuses the Sadducees of not knowing the

Scriptures nor the power of God. Here he accuses the Pharisees of not knowing the Scriptures either: "*If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.*" Let us notice a detail in this remark. "*If you had known what (this) is, I desire mercy, not sacrifice.*" The word "to know" (*ginōskō*) has a broader meaning than its use here. While it is legitimate to translate it here as meaning, "*if you had known the meaning of this text I now quote to you,*" the word is used elsewhere to indicate an intimate knowledge of persons. For instance, in response to the Angel Gabriel's message to her, Mary said, "*how will this be, since I do not know man (ou ginōskō)?*" (Luke 1:34). At the Last Supper, our Lord in his prayer states that "*eternal life is this, that they may know you (ginsōkōsin), Father and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*" (John 17:3). That is to say, it is more than that the Pharisees simply lack knowledge of a key Scriptural text. Our Lord may have been implying that they do not know *God*, for God is merciful and desires mercy more than sacrifice. They must go and learn to know the mercy of God,

which is to say, *Yahweh God himself*. He, Jesus, is the incarnation of the One who is rich in mercy.

Let us place ourselves with the disciples as Jesus confronts the Pharisees and defends his own. Look upon him! He is the Temple of temples, the abode of the living God. Destroy it, and he would raise it up in three days. He is the Lord of the Sabbath too. As the Lord, he is the revelation of the Father who is rich in mercy. Image of the unseen God, he is our Redeemer and our all. Let us love him with all our mind, heart, soul and strength, obeying him in everything.

A Second Reflection: Matthew 12:1-8

God Rich In Mercy It is not hard for a religious person to stray from the path that God intends, while remaining religious. The Pharisees were religious people, and were intent on adhering strictly to God's Law as they understood it. In general this is, of course, very laudable. But in their case – if we are to go on our Lord's words about many of them – they did not read the Scriptures with understanding. For instance, they

overlooked the insistence of Scripture on mercy, mercy and justice. And so they judged people, condemned them, and were not merciful. They were sinking into pride. Consider our Lord's remarks in today's Gospel (Matthew 12:1-8). They did not *"understand the meaning of the words: What I want is mercy, not sacrifice."* The Scriptures reveal that God is a God rich in mercy and kindness. He asks us to be like him, truly his children, and says that we must be like him precisely in his mercy if we are to benefit from his mercy and kindness ourselves.

Let us strive to be merciful especially in thought, resisting resentments, lack of forgiveness, bitterness in memories, for as our Lord says in another part of the Gospel, in this way we will be sons of our Father in heaven.



Saturday of the Fifteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall
behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go
astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the
faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever
is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it
honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns
with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: :Micah 2:1-5; Psalm 9; Matthew 12:14-21

*The Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. Aware of
this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he
healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was. This was to
fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: Here is my servant
whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my
Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not*

quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope. (Matthew 12: 14-21)

Christ's Way Philip II of Macedon (382 BC – 336 BC) took the throne of Macedon in 359 and began his gradual expansion – by force of arms – throughout the Greek Peninsular. He was on the threshold of an attempt on Persia when he was assassinated. In an amazing eleven year journey of conquest, his son, the young Alexander, conquered all the way from Egypt to India. Behind him there followed Greek institutions and the Greek language, which became the standard of the ancient world. Alexander was determined to conquer what he understood to be the world, and his means were arms, material resources and natural talent – especially his own. It is thought that he had designs for an eventual attack on Carthage. The decline and the division of his empire set in with his death (323 BC). For over two hundred years during this period Rome and Carthage had left one

another alone, signing treaties from time to time while each expanded. Finally, some eighty years after the death of Alexander, the Punic Wars between Carthage and Rome began, with Cato's motto emerging as the clarion call of Rome: *Carthago delenda est!* Carthage must be destroyed! By force of arms Rome prevailed and proceeded to its extraordinary domination of the civilized world. The Roman Empire lasted centuries, till in the West it buckled under the weight of the barbarian invasions from the North. The Eastern Roman Empire of Constantinople went on for another millennium. Meanwhile out of Arabia there came the Islamic whirlwind. In about 610 Mahomet had his religious experiences in the cave, and gradually became convinced that he was Allah's Prophet. Within two decades and by force of arms, Islam gained control of nearly all of the Arabian Peninsula. Within three years of this, Islam controlled Damascus, and the following year Syria and Israel. A year later Islam expanded into India, North Africa and Spain – and was stopped by Charles the Hammer in France. Again, an Empire has suddenly risen and enveloped vast areas by force of arms. It is the story of the world. When Satan showed the kingdoms of

the world in a moment of time to Christ in the desert, he would have shown the ebb and flow of conquest. This story of conquest was the story of the growth of kingdoms by *means of arms*.

Let this general backdrop be the setting for our Gospel today (Matthew 12: 14-21), in which Matthew interprets Christ's manner of ministry. Was it one of force? It was not. The struggle Mahomet faced from his own home city came down to a military struggle, and Mahomet prevailed. Our Lord faced a struggle, and he had incomparable powers he could have used, had he chosen. He could calm storms at sea. He could raise people from the dead and heal them of any illness. He could feed thousands with a handful of food. He could do anything. In the Garden of Gethsemane he awaited his betrayer and imminent captors. When they arrived and laid hands on him, Peter drew his sword and struck in order to defend him. Christ ordered him to desist, saying that if he merely asked, his heavenly Father would send twelve legions of angels to defend him. No power on earth could have resisted Christ, had physical force and conquest

been his chosen method of advance. But it was not. God sent his divine Son to establish here on earth his Kingdom, a Kingdom that had been foretold and which would last forever. But the means of world conquest were utterly different from the ways of the world. Are you a King, then? Pilate asked Jesus. *Yes, I am a King, but my kingdom is not of this world – if it were, my subjects would be fighting to prevent me from being handed over to the Jews. My Kingdom is not of this kind.* There was to be no force, no arms. In our Gospel today our Lord retreats because the Pharisees were plotting to kill him. Why did he retreat? It was because his method of victory was altogether different, and Isaiah the prophet had predicted this. *"This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope"* (Matthew 12:14-21).

He would lead justice to victory and in him the nations would put their hope. But his method was obedience to his heavenly Father amid the Cross, rejection and apparent failure. This is the weapon used for the Redemption of the human race, and for the sure and certain victory of Christ's Kingdom in and over the world. It is as sure as the day and much surer, that Christ will prevail over all the kingdoms of the world, especially over the kingdom and household of Satan. His method is obedience to the Father upon the Cross. This is the path his followers must take, and it is this which will give the victory. Every day to it, then! Ah! Now I begin!

A Second Reflection: Micah 2:1-5

A Christ-like Heart The prophet Micah utters a warning: "*Woe to those who plot evil, who lie in bed planning mischief!*" (2:1), and in the Gospel we have a dramatic instance of it. The Pharisees go out and begin plotting how to destroy Jesus (Matthew 12:14). Our Lord's reaction was the opposite. He responded with a strength that showed itself not in aggression and revenge, but in restraint and meekness,

fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah "*He will not brawl or shout, nor will any one hear his voice in the streets*" (Matt 14:15-21). Let us contemplate the figure of Jesus, meek and humble in the face of those who plotted evil against him, and let us resolve to be like him. This likeness must involve our thoughts about others, in the inner world of our hearts. Notice the person who is talking to himself: It is obvious that a lot is being said in his heart. God sees our hearts. Let us strive to be Christ-like in our hearts – meek and humble of heart and treating others kindly in the world of our memories and our thoughts.

To forgive and to love from the heart is a source of great self-denial and sanctification.



Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 54 (53): 6, 8 See, I have God for my help. The Lord sustains my soul. I will sacrifice to you with willing heart, and praise your name, O Lord, for it is good.

Collect Show favour, O Lord, to your servants and mercifully increase the gifts of your grace, that, made fervent in hope, faith and charity, they may be ever watchful in keeping your commands. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 18:1-10; Psalm 14;
Colossians 1:24-28; Luke 10:38-42

Jesus entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. She had a sister named Mary who sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me." The Lord said to her

in reply, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

For Jesus

If one wishes to attain a personal knowledge of the Lord, a most effective help is to place oneself in a Gospel scene with Jesus, and to be with him as he speaks and acts in that scene. From within that Gospel scene he will reveal himself to the soul, just as he revealed himself to the soul of Martha's sister Mary in today's Gospel. Let each resolve to do what our Lord holds up for our observance in our Gospel scene today. Consider Jesus (Luke 10: 38-42) as he speaks to the one who sits at his feet and listens to him. In our own hearts, let us gaze at Jesus speaking. He is God, the source of truth and light, the supreme teacher of every person. He is God, the guide of all humanity, the source of all light and goodness. He is the Incarnate Beauty of God. If one enters into a serious relationship with him in prayer and in faithful living, the beauty of Christ's heart and soul will become manifest, and will take possession of one's heart. St Augustine

addressed God as '*O Beauty, ancient and ever new.*' Jesus is this Beauty, and he is the Light of the world. But he will not be known by the outsider. On one occasion he said, *Come to me, all you who labour, and learn from me.* We must, then, *come* to him in order to learn. He will be found by the person who, like Mary in this Gospel scene, resolves to give to Jesus the full attention of his heart as a disciple. But this simple Gospel scene not only tells us about Jesus. It also reveals the vocation of the Christian. In the figure of Mary listening with rapt attention to the words of the Lord, we have a figure of the total love that the true disciple is called to have for Jesus. The love that the Scriptures command that we have for God himself, a total love of mind, heart and soul, is to be directed to Jesus himself. This love is to permeate everything we do in life, our daily prayer, work, sufferings. He is what our hearts are made for. We show this love for him by listening to his teaching and putting it faithfully into practice in our daily life.

By contrast, Martha is *distracted and worried* with many things. It is a particular moment in her life and is in no way a judgment

on her life in general, for Martha is a saint whose feast we celebrate every year on July 29. But that Gospel scene is meant by the inspired author, and hence by the Holy Spirit, to teach us something very important in the Christian life. Our Lord said to Martha that she was not to be fretting about so many things. Only one was necessary, and that is to have Jesus as the object of our heart's desire, to hear the word of God as it comes from Jesus, to hear it with love for him and in recognition that he is God, and then to put it into practice in our daily life. In our daily life we must abide in the Person, the word and the love of Jesus Christ. There are so many things that fill up the lives of people, about which they worry and fret, apart from the presence of Jesus. Jesus is thus reduced to being but one of these things. The true friends of Jesus who abide in his love will have worries, but the one thing necessary, their love for Jesus, will be the great anchor of their life. He is to be the joy of every man and woman. He is what our hearts are made for. So what must we do? We must, as it were, sit at the feet of Jesus, learn to gaze at him in faith with all our heart, listen to him speaking to us, and out of love for him put his word into practice in

our daily life. It is possible for a Christian to go right through life living in the way Martha was at that moment, worried and fretting about so many things, and never gaining possession of that one necessary thing, which is Jesus and his word coming to us in the Scriptures and in the teaching and sacraments of the Church. It is possible to be always doing what Martha did at that point, and never doing what Mary was doing then. We must put time into serious prayer with Jesus, especially the Eucharistic Jesus, into spiritual reading, into the overcoming of vices and growing in the virtues of Christ, into regular Confession, into a serious spiritual life.

While we ought be like Martha in assiduously serving our Lord in our neighbour, in everything we ought have him as the one thing necessary in our life. He is the supreme object of our hearts. For the Catholic, this especially means making the Eucharistic Jesus the summit and source of our daily life. Let us build up a strong daily life of prayer, and a life of service of others for love of Jesus Christ. We must bring an undivided love for, and obedience to, Jesus into our life, into

our prayer, our work, our all. This is symbolized by the figure of Mary in our Gospel scene.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 10:38-42)

Prayer In the moment encapsulated by our Gospel scene today, Mary gives her whole attention to our Lord, while Martha, who loved our Lord, frets and worries over many things. Our Lord's words to Martha (Luke 10:38-42) show that he wants the attention of our heart. He wants our love. He wants our lives to be founded on love for him and attention to his word. Love for Jesus is the basis of the life of the Christian, and in God's plan all are called to this love for Jesus. The Catechism asks, why did God make us? *God made us to know, love and serve Him here on earth and as a result of this to see and enjoy Him for ever in heaven.* The order of that statement of life is significant: We must know Him, love Him, and then on that basis, serve Him. But if we are to know and love Him we must think of Him and spend time with Him. At the core of our daily lives, our hearts have to be finding their centre, their peace and their happiness in Him. *'Come*

to me, all you who labour and are burdened,' he said elsewhere, 'and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light.' All is founded on a personal love for Jesus, and this depends on personal prayer. We must decide to be with Jesus, which is to say to spend time with Him. In any personal friendship, nothing will develop if we do not spend time with the person whose friend we wish to be. As a plan of life, regular time, indeed prime time, must be spent in thought and prayer in the presence of Jesus Christ.

We ought begin every day prayerfully by recalling God's special love for us and by offering the day to Him. The morning offering of ourselves to God is fundamental for growth in God's love, an offering we ought renew numerous times each day by means of short prayers to Jesus who is always within. We ought pray repeatedly to our Lady, St Joseph, our Guardian Angel, and other saints to whom we are drawn. Apart from these brief prayers that are so important, there are

two great elements of piety which are necessary to develop a personal relationship with our Lord. They are spiritual reading and daily meditation, and these two things are best done each day. The spiritual reading would include a gradual reading of the Scriptures, especially the New Testament. Perhaps something else from some other spiritual book could be included in the moments of spiritual reading immediately after the Scriptures, such as a life of a saint or something like *The Imitation of Christ*. Then apart from spiritual reading, I would urge some prayerful meditation in the presence of God during the day, say about ten minutes straight. Meditation is prayer, the prayer that comes from a prayerful consideration of, say, a Gospel scene which could be the Gospel of the liturgical day. Turn to the Gospel scene. Read it slowly and in the presence of Christ. Visualize the scene of the Gospel as if present, and put yourself in the company of Jesus in that Gospel scene. Just be with him for those minutes. Listen to him, and present your heart to him with all its desires, its needs, its difficulties. Give to Him those ten or fifteen minutes each day. You can then take the experience of Jesus in that scene into the day's work, and return briefly

to it often. Spiritual reading and the prayer of meditation each day – let us say, ten or fifteen minutes of each – is the key to spiritual growth. Far more is involved, but with this, the foundation will be there.

A further help may be to commit yourself, as well, to an hour of prayer each week perhaps in your Church before the Tabernacle, all the while making your day's work the expression of your love for Jesus whom you are coming to know more and more in prayer. If you follow these practices faithfully, things will happen. You will discover the presence of Jesus in your life. You will come to know his love for you and you will come to love him in return.



Monday of the Sixteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 54 (53): 6, 8 See, I have God for my help. The Lord sustains my soul. I will sacrifice to you with willing heart, and praise your name, O Lord, for it is good.

Collect Show favour, O Lord, to your servants and mercifully increase the gifts of your grace, that, made fervent in hope, faith and charity, they may be ever watchful in keeping your commands. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Micah 6:1-4.6-8; Psalm 49; Matthew 12: 38-42

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Jesus, Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you. He answered, A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of

Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. (Matthew 12:38-42)

Faith Our passage today is from the twelfth chapter of St Matthew, and it gives yet another episode in the conflict between Jesus Christ and the Pharisees and lawyers. Of course, in respect to this or any chapter, the original manuscripts did not contain the chapter and verse divisions in the numbered form familiar to modern readers. It is agreed that it is on the system of Archbishop Stephen Langton (1150-1228) in the early thirteenth century that the modern chapter divisions (and even arrangements of books) are based. That said, let us take chapter twelve as a context for our passage today and notice the attacks on our Lord by the scribes and Pharisees. At the outset, there is the complaint of the

Pharisees that our Lord's disciples were violating the Sabbath by picking ears of corn (12:2). Our Lord's refutation of this being given, the Pharisees are shown in the synagogue to be watching if he would heal on the Sabbath Day, which he did. Our Lord publicly refuted their muted criticism, leading them to plan his death (12:9-14). At that, our Lord withdrew from the place and crowds followed. The next episode is an exorcism, and the man thus freed spoke and could see. But when the Pharisees heard of it, they accused our Lord of having his power by collaboration with Satan. This too was refuted by our Lord, who warned them that they were blaspheming against the Holy Spirit (12: 22-38). They were a generation of vipers. There then follows the encounter of today (Matthew 12: 38-42), in which certain of the scribes and Pharisees require a sign, a miracle, from our Lord. With the exception of the event at the end of the chapter when the mother and relatives of Jesus ask to see him, the entire chapter narrates attacks on him by the scribes and Pharisees, and his repulsion of them. It is a portion of what was happening on a grander scale. The Pharisees – though not all (consider, for example, Nicodemus) – refused to give our

Lord their faith. The refusal was deliberate, studied, and demanding. "*Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.*"

In their own minds they constituted, as it were, a court of judgment. Jesus was asked to fulfil their requirements of proof, after which they would deliver their judgment. Our Lord told them that this showed they were an evil and adulterous generation. They were wicked (12:45). He pointed to the Scriptural figures of Jonah and the people of Nineveh. Jonah was not the ideal person to represent Yahweh God. He strove to avoid doing what God wanted of him. But despite his limitations, his word was immediately accepted by the people of Nineveh. He preached repentance, and the pagan city responded with obedience. Jonah worked no miracles, nor did he display moral perfection – as did Jesus Christ. But his word was sufficient because of the *good heart* of the people of Nineveh. People could tell that what he preached was true and divine in origin. They could tell, because of their *moral disposition*. If the people of Nineveh could and did do that, how much more ought the scribes and Pharisees accept the word of Christ,

for in him someone far greater than Jonah was here. Or again, the queen of the South in the Book of Kings came to hear the wisdom of Solomon. She listened, was grateful, and learned. If she, a pagan, had faith in the word of Solomon, who worked no miracles and who in later life was unfaithful to Yahweh God, how much more ought one have faith in the word of Jesus Christ. The demand of the scribes and Pharisees for a proof by miracle could not be reduced simply to a request for adequate grounds of belief. It primarily involved moral corruption and failure. It was an evil request they had made of Christ. The people of Nineveh had faith. So did the queen of the South. They, the Pharisees, ought have faith also. Our Lord's condemnation of the Pharisees shows that the act of faith is a moral matter, a matter of responsible choice, for which each person will be held accountable. The Pharisees failed the test.

The Pharisees had all the grounds they needed for faith in Jesus Christ. Miracles were not needed, just as miracles were not needed for the people of Nineveh, nor for the queen of the South. What was

needed was a good heart, a heart to perceive the goodness and complete trustworthiness of Jesus Christ himself. But of course, plenty of miracles were provided as well. These, too, bore witness to Christ's transcendent goodness. Let us all our lives live near to Jesus, with the eyes of our heart contemplating his Person day by day. This we should do because of our faith, and this contemplation of him will increase our faith. Faith is the foundation, and it takes us to sanctity.

A Second Reflection: (Micah 6: 1 4.6-8)

The Sacrifice of a Holy Life It is clear that in the ancient world religion consisted very largely in performing the right ceremonial and sacrifices to the gods. This acknowledged to the gods their dignity and sway over man. This ceremonial and religious acknowledgment was deemed to ensure their protection. Sacrifices were especially important. Of course, there was an element of real truth in this, and we see elements of it in the religion revealed by God to his chosen people. Sacrifice, ritual and the observance of constant honour to God himself was at the kernel of true religion. But distinctive to revealed

religion, especially when compared with the religion of other ancient peoples, was the importance of holiness of *life* in God's sight. In the words of the prophet Micah (6: 6-8): "*What is good has been explained to you, man; this is what the Lord asks of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.*" Be holy, God said, because I am holy.

In the religion revealed and established by our Lord himself – the Christian religion – holiness of life was itself a special sacrifice all his faithful are called to offer constantly to God. All the faithful share in a common priesthood, offering a holy life in union with that of Jesus himself.



Tuesday of the Sixteenth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 54 (53):6, 8 See, I have God for my help. The Lord sustains my soul. I will sacrifice to you with willing heart, and praise your name, O Lord, for it is good.

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Scripture today: Micah 7:14-15.18-20; Psalm 84; Matthew 12:46-50

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you. He replied to him, Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Pointing to his disciples, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever

does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. (Matthew 12:46-50)

God So Near A striking thing about religious belief is that, *typically*, the divine is perceived as *remote*. Aristotle saw actuality and potentiality as present in all things. The exception is the supreme unmoved Mover and Cause, in which there is no imperfection – which is to say, no potentiality. God is pure actuality (*Actus Purus*). He simply is. His life is self-contemplating thought, and he never loses this eternal repose. Aristotle's deductions are brilliant and have been used by great Christian thinkers, but to say the least, the abstract God whom he posits is very remote from man. If we turn to the polytheism of Greek religion, the gods were very concrete but to one with a philosophical cast of mind, simply unbelievable. A serious and profound thinker could not take them seriously as an explanation of the world. Zeus was the king of the gods and father of men, and may be looked on as something of a prototype of the high gods of the natural religions of mankind. Characteristically, the high god is remote, having

receded after establishing the world. Man deals with heavenly underlings, which is to say the second-rate deities that busy themselves with arbitrary interventions in the course of affairs. Apart from the revealed religion of the Jews (and, of course, the Christians), the great contender for religious dominance was Islam, whirling furiously out of Arabia with Koran and Sword, only stopped in its tracks at Tours by Charles Martel the Hammer in 732. But what was Islam's view of the supreme One? We might say it was that he is Master and utterly supreme. He is transcendent, beyond, ineffable. There is no god but Allah. He is great in a way no other is. While he is the Merciful and Compassionate one, what distinguishes him especially is that he towers above all else. Islamic teaching insists that Allah is the Yahweh of the Jews, but there are serious differences. The Islamic Allah may be said to be *viewed* as more powerful than Yahweh and he is certainly not the Bridegroom of a chosen people. Allah is *Master*, and he is above and beyond.

I mention this as a backdrop to our Gospel today (Matthew 12:46-50), which itself must be set against the backdrop of revealed religion generally. The God of the Jews intervened to woo a people, which is to say, to be their *Bridegroom*. He entered into a covenant with them and asked them to be a faithful *spouse*. If they were faithful to his commands, he would be with them in undying fidelity. The prophets (e.g., Hosea) spoke of him as the Husband of his people, who were given a mission for the benefit of all the peoples. All the nations of the earth would be blessed through them, if they were faithful to the covenant. God remained with them and would defend them. Their conviction was that he had chosen them, was with them, and helped them. He was all-holy and punished sin, but he was rich in mercy. There was only one God and he was *not* remote but very *near*. But now, he had become man, and in Jesus Christ he stands in our Gospel today in the midst of the people speaking to them. This is the great God, dwelling among men as one of them. The Incarnation is the mystery of mysteries, and the source of unending and prayerful wonder. It cannot be mentioned too much. Not least among the

marvels of this adorable Fact – the Fact of Jesus Christ – is that God has become man's *Brother*. What is to be said of this when set against the religions of the world, excepting that of Israel? It is in stark contrast with them. God is my Brother, because he is Jesus Christ. He is my Lord and my God – as Thomas the Apostle addressed him – but he is my Brother too. He is my Creator and my Judge, but he is my Friend as well. When our Lord rose from the dead he asked Mary Magdalene to "*go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.*" This is the point in our Lord's words of today's Gospel: "*Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Pointing to his disciples, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*" (Matthew 12:46-50). God the Son become man is our Brother, if we act as children of him who has made himself our "Abba," dear Father.

One of the reasons why polytheism has been the characteristic religion of mankind is that it has always been so difficult to imagine

how *one* God could create, sustain and rule *all* things. How immense he must be, if he does this! It is the most natural thing in the world to imagine the one God as remote from puny and vulnerable man. But he is not remote! He is our Father, our Brother and our Counsellor-Advocate, Father, Son and Spirit. We share in his very life. How beautiful has life become because of this! Nothing can now separate us from the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus. Let us then smile through life with the love and mercy of God before us, as we carry the cross after the One who is ahead of us.

A Second Reflection: (Micah 7:14-15.18-20)

Sin and the Mercy of God Before the emergence of Rome well over 2000 years ago, the Etruscans developed a civilization that dominated the Italian peninsular. By comparison with surrounding peoples, their life was enjoyable. One feature of their religious belief was that they expected the Afterlife also to be very enjoyable. They do not seem to have had any fear of a judgment to come and of punishment for sin and crimes during life. This could indicate that they had little

sense of sin and of the need for mercy. By contrast, and perhaps at about the same time, the prophet Micah was preaching in far-away Palestine – we have an example of his preaching in Micah 7:14-20. In this passage he extols the mercy of God. God is a God of mercy, and the prophet appeals to him to "*have pity on us, tread down our faults, to the bottom of the sea throw all our sins.*" It indicates a profound *sense of sin*. In revealed religion we are ever reminded of our sins, and we are constantly reminded that God is rich in mercy if we but repent of them. If there is no repentance, God will not be pleased.

Our Lord came to take on himself the burden of our sins, to expiate for them, and thus to show the mercy of God. Let us pray for a deep sense of sin and for a sense of the richness of God's mercy.



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Scripture today: Jeremiah 1:1.4-10; Psalm 70; Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and

ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop - a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 13:1-9)

The Soil As I have mentioned before, we must not take too seriously the division of the Gospel narrative into chapters. This division into chapters came long after the writing of the Gospels, and at times the division can be misleading. For instance, our Gospel passage today marks the beginning of chapter 13, but we notice that what Jesus does in this passage occurs on "that day" (*en tē hēmera*, 13:1), the same day as the events of the previous chapter 12. So what goes on in chapter 13 is to be understood as flowing directly on from what went before it. While in chapter 12 the setting is our Lord's instructions to the multitudes (especially in the synagogue on the Sabbath day), much of

the chapter is taken up with the conflict with the scribes and Pharisees. Our Lord's judgment on the lack of faith of the religious leaders is given, together with his refutation of their accusations. At the end of this conflict, Christ describes the true disciple, the one who is a brother, sister and mother to him (12:48-50). That person is the one who does the will of the Father. Then the scene changes – but it is still "that day" (13:1). Jesus leaves the house and sits by the sea-shore to speak to "great multitudes." So great were the numbers, that he decides to sit in a boat and address them from there. Just as in the previous chapter – earlier "that day" – he had dealt at length with the refusal of the religious leaders, so now – this same day – he deals with the refusal of the multitude. The connecting thread – the theme for this same day – is the refusal to believe, and who the true disciple is. At times it has been said that the Old Testament is a record of divine judgment and wrath on sin, while the New is a record of divine compassion – which is to say of a God who does not condemn. But even if we look only at these two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew (12 and 13), we can clearly see how our Lord is in the tradition of the prophets who

condemn sin. Here our Lord is especially condemning the sin of unbelief, whether in the Pharisees earlier, or in the multitudes now. In each case the contrast is drawn with true disciples.

With that as our broader context, we turn to the parable with which this section of the Gospel begins, a section, as just said, which is especially concerned with the unsatisfactory response to the person and word of Jesus Christ. Our Lord has the multitudes before him and we are out in the open air by the Sea of Galilee. It is as if the multitudes represent the chosen people, and indeed the entire world. It is to all of these that our Lord directs his parable. Broad and simple in its strokes, there are two protagonists in the image being drawn. There is the seed which the farmer is sowing and there is the ground on which his seed is falling. The farmer and his seed is the constant, while the soil is the variable. Obviously, Jesus who is speaking to them from the boat is the farmer who is sowing the seed, and they are the soil on which it is falling. Christ's preoccupation is not himself nor his word. His preoccupation is the multitude before him that is gazing at him and

receiving his word. His word, like seed, is falling on their ears, but are they truly listening to it? A little before, earlier "that day," his preoccupation had been with the religious leaders of the multitude. They were hard ground, hostile to his word and unlike the true disciple who does the will of the heavenly Father. Now it is the multitude whom our Lord considers and again, a striking contrast is drawn between many of them and the true disciple. There are various categories of soil. There is the path, trampled hard by the feet of people walking on it. The seed makes no impression, and remains on the surface to be taken by the birds of the air. There is the rocky land – of which there was a great deal in Palestine. On this, the seed had no chance of striking real root. Then there were the briars in which the seed was smothered. But then there was the good soil which enabled the seed to produce a harvest. This, then, is our Lord's description of the world, and at the end of his picture he pinpoints the critical element. What matters is whether a person *has ears* with which *to hear* his word. *Listen*, he says, *you that have ears to hear with!*

The exemplar of the disciple who listens to the word is Mary, the mother of Jesus. She heard the word and pondered it in her heart, and it produced a harvest of holiness in her. Let us place ourselves in the Gospel scene, among the multitude listening to the Master. He speaks of the good soil that receives the word, and asks that we hear, that we listen. Let us resolve really to listen, and to have ears to hear with. Looking at him, we step forward from the crowd, resolving to be more than a mere viewer, but rather a true disciple. It is the disciple that produces the harvest through the power of the word and grace of Christ. With him we can produce the harvest.

A Second Reflection: (Jeremiah 1:1.4-10)

The Power of God's Word One of the things that man experiences and which has affected his religious culture is power. Man has experience of things with power of various kinds. These things give him an inkling of heavenly power, the power of the gods, or of God. This power of God is manifested in various ways, but one way that recurs throughout Scripture is in and through his *word*. In a well

known passage from the prophet Jeremiah (1:1.4-10) the prophet protests his weakness when God appoints him to be a prophet. But God says "*There! I am putting my words into your mouth.*" With them the prophet will be able to "*tear up and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.*" In receiving the word of God the prophet receives the power of God. Our Lord refers to this power of God's word in his parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9). The word of God is like a seed that has power for growth, and if the soil admits and allows it, growth will surely come.

Let us maintain a deep respect in our hearts for the word of God in the Scriptures and in the Church's Tradition, a respect that leads us to work on becoming good soil. Good soil is the readiness to hear the word and to put it into practice. If we are good soil, God's power will do the rest.



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Scripture today: Jeremiah 2:1-3.7-8.12-13; Psalm 35;

Matthew 13:10-17

The disciples came to Jesus and asked, Why do you speak to the people in parables? He replied, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have,

even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matthew 13:10-17)

Unwilling During the decade between 1844 and 1854 numerous Anglicans entered the Catholic Church in England. The most famous of them was John Henry Newman who had led the Oxford Movement, but there were many others of ability and considerable education. They injected a new life and culture into the Catholic body. One was John

Moore Capes (1813-1889), an M.A. from Balliol College, Oxford; Anglican curate of Long Newnton, Wiltshire, then Anglican Rector of St John's, Eastover, Bridgwater, Somersetshire. He entered the Church not long before Newman, having sacrificed position, personal wealth and much else. As a Catholic his most notable activity was to begin *The Rambler* periodical. In an article of 1849 he asserted that his own conversion could be justified by the same reasoning which is employed in any human science. That is, that "the balance of probabilities" was decidedly in favour of Rome, and that he had embraced "the most probable of two alternatives". In a private letter to Capes, a Catholic theologian criticized this "probabilistic" argument on the ground that it was a point of doctrine that the certainty with which a Catholic believes in the Church was an absolute, not merely a moral, certainty. The doctrines of the Catholic Church could not be held as merely highly probable. They were absolutely certain, and one who had the faith held them as such. Capes regarded this as an absurd position, holding that a conclusion can be no more certain than its premises. In the nature of the case, the premises of the faith were but probable, so therefore was

the conclusion. He subsequently abandoned the Catholic Church and returned to Anglicanism (finally returning to the Catholic Church before he died). Many things can be said about his denial of the absolute certainty of faith and his reduction of it to high probability, but I introduce this only to draw out but one aspect of it. Capes seemed to look on faith as a purely intellectual or logical process – subject, therefore, to the laws simply of logic. As he spoke of it, faith seemed to be little more than a process of the reason.

Faith is indeed a process of the reason, but it is not simply this. It involves the *will*, what a person secretly wants and chooses. It involves a moral dimension for which he will be held responsible. It involves a personal choice – the choice to believe, having perceived that there are excellent grounds for belief. This brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 13:10-17). It seems that our Lord especially wished to make clear this moral dimension in the act of belief, and it was guiding his method of discourse and preaching. He did not simply set out his case before the people along the lines of a full and logical

system, expecting his hearers thereby to be led to faith. Rather, we see him telling them only so much, perhaps hoping that the moral disposition of various among them would lead them on to understanding. What do we see? He has told the parable of the sower going out to sow, and how the results of his sowing depended on the quality of the soil on which the seed fell. That is all he said to them, at the end of which he told them to *listen!* – to *hear* what he had said. Of course, our Lord did not always teach in this somewhat obscure fashion – in John chapter 6, in a very public setting he is remarkably explicit about the Eucharist, to the point of losing many of his disciples. But in our Gospel today he goes no further than present his parable. There is no public explanation of it – that is left to the time he will have with his disciples. So the disciples themselves ask our Lord why he spoke to the crowds only in parables. His answer is revealing, and it is a warning to us. The crowds are not disposed to see. *“In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they* Aclosed their eyes, so they cannot

see. Why is this? It is because they *fear* to see: "*Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.*" In their heart of hearts they are unwilling to receive the word of Christ, because of what it will entail. Faith is not just a matter of logic.

It brings us back to the parable our Lord has just told. It is the good soil which, once it has received the seed, produces the harvest. That harvest is holiness of life and a share in the mission of Jesus. But the seed has to be received, and in the multitude it seems that there was not the willingness to receive it – according to the explanation our Lord gives his disciples. The multitude, consciously or unconsciously, was *unwilling* to receive the word with a full and ready heart, lest they understand and turn – repent – and receive the grace of healing. Let us ask our Lord to give us a heart that truly welcomes his word, with the ready disposition to do all that it requires.

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 13:10-17)

Spiritual Sight *"Why do you talk to the crowds in parables?"* (Mt.13:10). In reply our Lord spoke of the mystery of the human heart. Through one's own fault it can become blind, with serious consequences following. In our Lord's description of the "crowds," *"their ears are dull of hearing and they have shut their eyes for fear they should see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their heart, and be converted and be healed by me."* This will have serious consequences, *"for anyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but from any one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."* By contrast the disciples saw and heard, and how blessed they were! *"But happy are your eyes because they see, your ears because they hear!"* They were more blessed than the holy ones before them who had not laid eyes on Christ.

Let us think of the Gospel examples, such as St Mary Magdalene, of those who looked on Christ and heard his word with a willing heart. Let us then strive to hear and to see, whatever be the cost of its implications. We will only do this if we truly want it. Let us choose Christ, then!



Friday of the Sixteenth Week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11;
 Matthew 13:18-23

Jesus said to his disciples: "Hear the parable of the sower. The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the Kingdom without understanding it, and the Evil One comes and steals away what was sown in his heart. The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears

the word and receives it at once with joy. But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit. But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirty fold.” (Matthew 13:18-23)

Our Response

Our Gospel passage today provides us with our Lord's explanation to the disciples of the parable which he had told the crowds. The crowds were given the parable and nothing more, other than the request that they mull it over with real attention. Later he gives a straightforward explanation, and in it there is described what it is that contends against the word of God in man's life. There are three kinds of persons who receive Christ's teaching. There is the one on whom Christ's teaching can make not a dent. So hard is his heart that it must lie on the surface of his life, unable to have any influence. That person is like the pathway on which some of the seed will fall, resistant to all

that comes to it from above. Like a bird of the air, Satan comes easily and quickly to take away the word. Satan frustrates the power of the word, but this is because the person who heard it has become spiritually impenetrable. Obviously there are degrees of this hardness of heart, and we see examples of it in the Gospels, especially in some of the religious leaders. No matter what Christ did before their very eyes, they were beyond his influence. The more Christ displayed the divinity which his humanity normally veiled, the more implacable became their opposition to him. They were, our Lord says in the Gospel of St John, children of their father the devil who was a liar and a murderer from the beginning. Let us notice that while the word does not penetrate this set of persons at all, with each of the other categories the word of God does gain an access. There is the person who receives the word at once, and with joy. The teaching of Christ penetrates to his heart. The critical question, though, is what happens to it then. Just because it gains access does not mean that it will do its work because even then it can be frustrated by forces inimical to it. Two instances are given: the one whose heart "has no root" (*ouk echei de hrizan*), and the one whose

heart is entangled in other matters such as the cares of this world and the deceit of riches (*merimna tou aiōnos kai he apatē tou ploutou*).

While many of the religious leaders may be regarded as instances of the impenetrable ground, examples appear in the Gospels of the other categories of soil. On one occasion an excellent young man came with haste to our Lord to ask what he must do to gain eternal life. The word of God was able to penetrate his heart, for he was eager to hear it. Our Lord looked on him with love and proceeded to extend to him a priceless invitation. If you wish to be perfect – and you are in effect saying to me that this is what you want – then sell all and give to the poor and have me instead. Come, follow me. But the young man went away sad, because he had great wealth. His heart, it was then discovered, was entangled in the deceit of riches. He wanted eternal life, but he wanted the riches of this life too. It was a deceit and it led to the loss of the pearl of great price. The word of Christ was quickly choked out of his life by the briars that overlaid his soul. On one dramatic occasion our Lord spoke in the synagogue of Capernaum. He

announced the doctrine of the Holy Eucharist, and there must have been many disciples in the congregation, for we read that they began to murmur against him and his teaching. How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Our Lord proceeded to teach it more explicitly – he did not tone it down or drop the subject out of a "prudent" judgment that now was not the time to speak of such matters. He, filled as he always was by his own Holy Spirit, proceeded to speak even more explicitly. At this there was virtually a walk-out of many of his disciples. They went home and walked no more with him. What was to be said of their initial acceptance of him? They were his disciples. They had no root in them. They accepted him and his word at once with joy but when difficulties arose – such as difficulties in understanding – they fell. Perhaps too there was a disappointment in their dreams of what their new Messiah would do. His flesh would have to be eaten! The Greek is "*skandalizetai*." They were "scandalized," which is to say, they fell (away) from following him. Many others both lack root and are enmeshed in other hopes. Perhaps Judas Iscariot was of this kind.

There are, however, many beautiful souls. They are good and promising soil. Their hearts are such that they willingly hear the word and understand its blessings, its bearings and its implications for now and hereafter. They understand that in Jesus Christ has come every heavenly blessing. Nothing is to be compared with him. What of you? our Lord asked the Twelve, following his discourse on the Eucharist when he lost his audience. Lord, to whom shall we go? Simon immediately answered. You have the words of eternal life, and we believe. He and the Twelve but one went on to bear a harvest. Let us be like them! Let us ask God to make us good soil!



Saturday of the Sixteenth Week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Jeremiah 7:1-11; Psalm 83; Matthew 13:24-30

Jesus proposed a parable to the crowds. "The Kingdom of heaven may be likened to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everyone was asleep his enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat, and then went off. When the crop grew and bore fruit, the weeds appeared as well. The slaves of the householder came to him and said,

'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where have the weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' His slaves said to him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' He replied, 'No, if you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until harvest; then at harvest time I will say to the harvesters, "First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles for burning; but gather the wheat into my barn."' (Matthew 13:24-30)

The Weeds As I mentioned in a Gospel reflection a few days back, one of the most interesting phenomena within the emerging Catholic community of England in the late 1840s was the founding of *The Rambler* periodical by a convert Anglican clergyman, John Moore Capes. It brought into prominence Capes himself, who is an interesting instance of one who at great sacrifice to himself and his interests left the Anglican Church, embraced Catholicism, and then in due course abandoned Catholicism and reverted to Anglicanism (although he returned again to the Catholic Faith before he died). As a reverted Anglican, he wrote his book, *To Rome and Back* (1873), and in it he

extols the broad liberty of opinion and dogma which is allowed in Anglicanism. The Catholic Church, he came to think, was impossibly repressive, tyrannical, and resistant of the claims of reason. One feature of his circuitous journey was that as a young Anglican clergyman he became disillusioned with the divisions and strife especially in matters of doctrine among his Anglican confreres. He began to think that because of this disunity (together with matters of doctrine) the Anglican communion could not be considered as the Church founded by Christ. But when he entered the Catholic Church (in 1845, not long before Newman), he gradually discovered that it too was marred by internal arguments and strife. It was all too human, and (together with other doctrinal difficulties he had, including the Catholic doctrine on the certainty of faith) he began to reconsider the validity of Catholic claims. He went on to reject the Catholic notion of religious faith, its doctrine on the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance, and many other things besides. The interesting thing is that a catalyst for all this was his disillusion with *arguments and strife* among both the clergy and laity of the Church. There were, we might say, so many *weeds in the*

field. How could this all-too-human complex be the Church that Christ founded! One cannot help but think that in his search for the Church Christ founded, he failed to notice the import of our Gospel text today.

In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 13:24-30), our Lord speaks of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of God and of heaven was the goal of the entire Scriptures and of the history of God's chosen people. All the nations of the earth would be blessed, Abraham had been promised. There was One coming to whom would pass the sceptre of Judah. In him, God intended to rule and to overcome evil. The Kingdom of heaven was the concrete ideal to which history was moving, and the Messiah would be its Agent. Now he had come in the Person of Jesus. In another passage of the Gospels our Lord entrusts to Simon Peter, the Rock on which he would build his Church, the keys to the Kingdom of heaven. So the kingdom of heaven was present in his Church. How marvellous ought be his Church, then! How free of imperfection his Church must be, for this was the goal of God's providence in history! How it must be the perfect home

of man, the epitome of all his aspirations! But no – *ultimately* it will be so, but *not yet*. Our Lord explicitly says that the kingdom of heaven "*may be likened to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everyone was asleep his enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat, and then went off. When the crop grew and bore fruit, the weeds appeared as well.*" Now, if this is how the kingdom of heaven is here on earth – prescinding, of course, from this kingdom as it will be hereafter – then in many respects the experience of it will be like our experience of any "kingdom" or body of people. Anywhere we care to look there are good things and bad. There are pleasant, courteous, generous and helpful people, and there are people who are a painful burden. Our Lord is in effect saying here that in his Church, the locale and seed-bed of his kingdom here on earth, one will encounter a similar situation. The good that is there comes from God, while the evil that is most certainly there and that will be experienced, comes from the Evil one. The Church is the Temple of God and the body of Christ, but it is also the abode of his very human and fallen children.

Why does not God get rid of the evil, and allow us to experience just the good of which he is the cause? Would this not make it much easier to believe that the Church is indeed a divine institution, indeed that it is the mystical body of Christ her divine head? It would have saved Capes! We do not know, but we do know that God has judged that this is best, for in our parable the master of the field says, *"if you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until harvest; then at harvest time I will say to the harvesters, 'First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles for burning; but gather the wheat into my barn.'"* It is at the Judgement that all will be revealed. After that, there will be no weeds in God's Kingdom, but God will be all in all.

A Second Reflection: Jeremiah 7: 1-11

The Temple of the Lord The prophet Jeremiah spoke forthrightly to his own people in God's name, accusing them of seriously mistreating their fellow men, of worshipping other gods, and then, despite all this, of coming to worship in the Temple of the Lord without

changing their lives (Jeremiah 7: 1-11). They were treating the Temple as if it were a robbers' den: "*Do you take this Temple that bears my name for a robbers' den?*" We remember how our Lord cleansed the Temple, saying to the buyers and sellers that they were using the Temple as if it were a robbers' den – the very words of Jeremiah so long before. He accused those frequenting the Temple of not recognising its sacred character and its requirement, therefore, of repentance when entering it.

How much more do our own churches, graced as they are with the real presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle, require that we recognise – by our whole demeanour, our behaviour and attitude of heart – the all holy Presence abiding there, and that we resolve to turn away from sin. Let us take warning from Jeremiah's words, and from the action of our Lord in cleansing the Temple.



Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6-7, 36 God is in his holy place,
God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might
and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom
nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your
mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may
use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to
those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138:1-3, 6-8;
Colossians 2:12-14; Luke 11:1-13

*Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of
his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his
disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be*

your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us, and do not subject us to the final test." And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend to whom he goes at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived at my house from a journey and I have nothing to offer him,' and he says in reply from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked and my children and I are already in bed. I cannot get up to give you anything.' I tell you, if he does not get up to give the visitor the loaves because of their friendship, he will get up to give him whatever he needs because of his persistence. "And I tell you, ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Luke 11:1-13)

Petition The study of the religions of man suggests to us certain things which prompt religion in individuals and in communities. There is the experience of guilt and the testimony of the conscience. There is the experience of change everywhere and of the fragility of all things. Very importantly, there is the sense of helplessness in the face of need and evil. This prompts man to turn to the higher, heavenly powers for assistance in gaining what he knows he desperately needs. Whatever be the reason for one's sense of helplessness, it prompts a person to appeal to the great One (or ones) above. But we also know that despite this, many give up on praying for what they need. They pray, and as far as they are concerned, all remains silent. Nothing seems to happen as a result of their prayer. So many give up asking for what they began to pray for, while perhaps continuing to be religious, and continuing to turn to God at various times for what they need. Some even give up on prayer as being useless. Some give up even on God. Some abandon religion. There seems to be no answer to their problem of evil. Prayer does not seem to work. To this we have our Lord's reply in today's Gospel (Luke 11: 1

13), when he was asked by his disciples to teach them to pray. Notice this: the Lord's Prayer that he taught them was a prayer of *petition*, made up of various petitions. Our Lord wants us to ask our heavenly Father for all we need. It is very pleasing to God to see us asking him for what we or others need. He wants to hear our petitions. And our Lord gives an extended commentary on just this fact, that God wants to hear our prayer and will hear it. Our Lord makes it very, very clear. "*So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you.*"

We must, then, approach prayer with confidence and persistence, for this is the bearing of our Lord's parable of the person persistently knocking on the door. We can expect God to hear our prayer – leaving it up to him, of course. Being God, clearly he knows how our prayer is best answered. I tend to think that generally we approach prayer for our needs, or the needs of others, without very much confidence in God. Why? Because we are people of little faith and go simply by appearances. We do not accept our Lord's word in

faith. We ought trust him, because he is God. But then too, our Lord's instruction on how to pray tells us what are our true needs. Do we really know what to pray for, and what is in our best interests? Often we do, and if we can place ourselves in the presence of God and, with a clear conscience, feel confident that what we intend praying for will be pleasing to God, we ought pray for it. But so very often we do not know what is the best thing to pray for. In the Lord's Prayer, though, we are told very clearly. We are told to pray that our heavenly Father's name will be held holy, that his kingdom will come, that he will give us our daily bread and whatever else we need, that he will forgive us our sins as we forgive those who are in debt to us, and that he will keep us from falling into sin. Especially are we to pray for the Holy Spirit, for *"how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"* All this means that we ought ask God to enable us to live in a way that will most honour and glorify his name. Therein lie our best interests. If by our lives God is glorified, if by the way we live, no matter what be our situation in life, his kingdom comes and his name is

hallowed, our own best and truest interests will be served. God's glory ought therefore be the object of our prayer.

The glory of God is our best interest. Apart from the Lord's Prayer, let us every day pray that simple prayer petitioning that God be honoured and glorified. Let us say it morning and night and during the day: "*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.*" Say this with Mary each day, in and through the Hail Mary.

A Second Reflection (Luke 11:1-13)

Answer to Prayer Today we are presented with a wonderful Gospel passage: '*So I say to you, 'our Lord assures us, 'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks will always have the door opened to him'* (Luke 11:1-13). What our Lord says is encouraging. Consider how Abraham prayed, and what he prayed for, as told to us in the First

Reading (Genesis 18:20-32). The sinfulness of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah was so great that God was about to destroy them. But Abraham prayed persistently to God, bargained with him, and with profound reverence asked him to spare the two cities even for the few just ones there. And God agreed – the problem was that Abraham could not find the few numbers he agreed to. So then, God wants us to ask for things. *Ask and you shall receive*, our Lord promises. These are exciting words to hear, and they are addressed to all of us. But do we really believe them? A person might think, I have asked at various times and I have not received. This puzzle of mind could become a temptation to refuse belief in the word of Jesus Christ, without clearly realizing it. As a result one might fail to ask God for what we need in life, including very essential and important things which our Lord wants us to ask for. Because of this we may not receive them. An infant asks for a razor blade and does not get it. Is it not obvious that it would scarcely be wise and loving of God to give us whatever we ask for, simply because we ask for it? God is first and foremost our Father, so like a father he listens to us with wisdom and love. Again, someone

hurts us by a wounding comment in public before others. In response to that injury we ask God to inflict a serious injury on that person in return. Must we be surprised if God does not answer that prayer? Apart from the question of God acting in character, in any case is that what we really need? Is the granting of that specific request the best answer to our prayer?

Let us take an instance of a request to our Lord presented by a few of his closest and most loyal friends. The mother of James and John came to our Lord with her sons. Our Lord asked, what is it that you want me to do for you? She said, put my two sons at your right and at your left – in the first positions, that is – in your kingdom. Our Lord replied that they did not know what they were asking. Can you drink the cup I must drink, he asked? Time and time again, we may not realize what we are asking for, and the cost it could involve. Our Lord says in another part of the Gospel, *'What father among you would give his son a snake if he asks for a fish, or hand him a scorpion if he asks for an egg?'* God's response to our request is not to make things more

difficult for us by disappointing us. He will answer it, if it is made in the right spirit recognizing that he is God and that we are his children. He will answer it, but in the way he knows best. The problem is that generally we do not know what is good for us. We do not always know what to pray for. Before asking God for anything, we ought put ourselves in his presence and ask him to help us to see what is best for us. We ought ask, what would God want me to ask for? Then, if we do indeed think what we want to ask for is likely to please God and be in accord with his plan, we ought pray for it. In fact, we should pray for numerous things in this spirit all our lives. If we ask God for more, he will give more. But we should pray in the way Jesus our Lord did when he was facing his Passion. He made his request that his cup be taken from him, but added, *'not what I want but what you want.'* That is the perfect prayer of petition. It trusts in God our Father, it believes in God's power, his wisdom, and his love, and it seeks guidance before even asking. In our Lord's case, his heavenly Father did not take away the cup, but sent a great heavenly companion, an angel, to console and sustain our Lord in his Passion that was soon to begin.

Let us remember St Monica. Her son had abandoned the Catholic faith and was living in sin. Her prayers for her son's conversion were persistent, ardent, long-lasting. As a result, he converted and became one of the greatest saints in the Church's history, and one of the most influential thinkers and writers of all time. He is St Augustine of Hippo. Ask and you shall receive. Let us pray constantly for the things we need, such as, that we make daily progress in holiness; that we fulfil our responsibilities in a way that will be pleasing to God; that we raise our children well; that we shall spend ourselves in good work, doing it for God's glory.



Monday of the Seventeenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6-7, 36 God is in his holy place,
God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might
and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom
nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your
mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may
use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to
those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 13:1-11; Psalm: Deuteronomy 32;
Matthew 13:31-35

*Jesus proposed a parable to the crowds. "The Kingdom of heaven is
like a mustard seed that a person took and sowed in a field. It is the
smallest of all the seeds, yet when full grown it is the largest of*

plants. It becomes a large bush, and the birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches.” He spoke to them another parable. “The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened.” All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables. He spoke to them only in parables, to fulfil what had been said through the prophet: I will open my mouth in parables, I will announce what has lain hidden from the foundation of the world. (Matthew 13:31-35)

Growth We could say that anything that has life will grow. A seed is planted, and the plant begins to grow. An animal's offspring are born, and they begin to grow. A child grows. Yes, anything that has life will grow – provided the conditions are there that *favour* growth. A seed that is planted in poor soil will not result in much growth, and our Lord told one parable about the person who hears the word of the Kingdom of Heaven that featured this very point. It was only the seed that fell in *good* soil that bore a harvest. A child born into extremely unfavourable circumstances may not grow – in fact that child may not even

survive. Intellectual and moral growth usually require adequate and favourable conditions for growth. In our Gospel passage today our Lord gives us a parable explaining the Kingdom of heaven, and its emphasis is on the *growth* of this Kingdom. Almost the whole of this chapter is given over to parables explaining the Kingdom of Heaven – which is to say, the new regime of God's lordship being established by Jesus Christ. There are different perspectives on the Kingdom being drawn out in these parables. The first parable of the chapter was that of the sower going out to sow: it is concerned with those who hear the word of the Kingdom (*pantos akouontos ton logon*, 13:19). Such persons vary in quality and depth, and it is those represented by the good soil who produce the harvest. The next parable, that of the weeds sown among the wheat, seems also to describe the *range of those* who are present in the kingdom. There are good and bad in the Kingdom and all will be resolved at the Judgment. Our parable today speaks more of the *power of growth possessed by God's kingdom*, with less focus on the varying quality of its subjects. The kingdom is like a tiny seed which grows and becomes a large bush, the home of the birds of

the sky. It is also like the yeast that leavens the flour, making it rise to become beautiful bread. A distinctive note, then, of Christ's Kingdom is that it has a striking power of growth, despite entirely adverse conditions.

When Christ was suddenly arrested and summarily tortured and put to his horrible and disgraceful death, that should have been the end of the matter of Christianity. What would have happened to Buddhism if Buddha had, a mere three years into his career, been suddenly crucified? What would have happened to Islam if, in the conflict between Mecca and Medina, Mahomet had been captured and crucified or beheaded? Mahomet made sure that he was not captured, for he knew that it would have been the end of it had he been. He marched on his enemies and prevailed by force of arms. Then, because of the superiority of both his religious message and his military resources, his hegemony spread. This set the stage for the rapid military conquest after he had gone. The early spread of Islam is seen by many, even most Moslems, as a divine vindication of their message and their

prophet. But to the observer, the spread can be accounted for by the natural means employed. But what is to be said of Christianity? Its Founder came to an inglorious and sudden end, but that very end was like the mustard seed, the smallest seed of all, falling into the ground and budding forth over time with remarkable life. It became the biggest of bushes, and birds of the whole sky came to settle in its branches. The rejection and crushing of the Founder was the pattern followed by the body. The early Church was persecuted and crushed, but what resulted was further life. The infant church huddled in the Upper Room, was visited by the mighty Spirit of God, and surged forth with new life. On Peter's preaching, the first proclamation of the Gospel following the Church's birth at Pentecost, persons from all over the world were baptized. The Church, in them, had instantly reached the ends of the earth (Acts 2: 8-11, 2:41). In them, all the nations had become disciples, and Christ's church was shown to be catholic. This was the immediate flowering following the death and resurrection of the Founder. It was a remarkable exemplification of today's parable of the mustard seed. Then came three centuries of persecution throughout the

Empire. Christ was being crucified time and again, but the resurrection continued unabated, and finally the Empire found itself Christian. The Kingdom is one that will *grow*.

What each member of the Kingdom must say is, *this means me*. The Church has a divine power within it to grow. Its growth is for the purpose of giving glory to God and sanctifying man. God's plan is that Christ be born within us and that he prevail in our hearts and in the world. This is the mystery now revealed to all, St Paul writes, *Christ in you, your hope of glory* (Colossians 1:27). The universal lordship of Jesus Christ is the goal of the Kingdom, and with that, God will be all in all. This wondrous goal has not just been left in the hands of weak human strength. There is a divine principle of growth, which is the life of grace, powering it forward. Let us entrust ourselves to this divine impetus, and so live that it will make saints of us.

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 13: 31-35)

Living by Faith, Not by Appearances We are creatures not just of intellect but of sense. We see, hear, touch, smell and we taste. But a hazard inherent in this is that we can tend to go only by sense and appearances. However, in the Christian life we are called to live by realities we know, not by our senses, but by faith in God speaking to us, which is to say faith in his word. Our Lord tells us that the Christian life, this life which is Christ in us, is like a tiny mustard seed that has immense possibilities. It is like yeast that leavens the flour (Matthew 13: 31-35). If it is the case that the Kingdom of God is like a tiny seed, or like mere leaven — as it is because Christ has said it is — then for much of our Christian life we may find ourselves working without actually seeing much result. A tiny seed in the ground is not very obvious, nor is the yeast when it is in the flour. That is to say, in the life of faith we will not be able to go by mere appearances. But if the seed is to come to fruition we must keep at it, toiling with optimism at

our daily duties, at our daily spiritual regimen, at everything else that God wants us to do, with energy and dedication.

We will only be able to do this if we live by faith. If we live by this faith, the harvest will come. The seed will become the tree "*so that the birds of the air come and shelter in its branches.*"



Tuesday of the Seventeenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6-7, 36 God is in his holy place,
God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might
and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom
nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your
mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may
use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to
those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 14:17-22; Psalm 78; Matthew 13:36-43

*Jesus dismissed the crowds and went into the house. His disciples
approached him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the
field." He said in reply, "He who sows good seed is the Son of Man, the
field is the world, the good seed the children of the Kingdom. The*

weeds are the children of the Evil One, and the enemy who sows them is the Devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. Just as weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his Kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears ought to hear.” (Matthew 13:36-43)

The Future A couple marry in a farming district in a remote but somewhat idyllic valley. They have four children who grow up on the farm, going to the elementary school with one of them receiving secondary education as well. Their schooling passes and they each arrive at adulthood, close to one another but each of them being different in character and temperament from the other. They marry one after the other and their paths diverge, and great differences in the paths of each become manifest. They raise their children, and how different

their children are! How different their spouses! One especially significant difference is the degree of religious faith which comes to characterise each. So it is that each reaches old age and passes on. The one has become profoundly religious and committed absolutely to God. The next less so, but with a living faith nevertheless. Another lives his religious faith but poorly, and the fourth has lost his religious faith altogether. They are buried in cemeteries far apart and scarcely known among the wider circle of their relatives, but there are a few in that wider circle who find themselves reflecting on the lives of those four brothers and sisters. The course of their lives could never have been predicted. The future as it unfolded turned out to be, on that small scale, remarkable and surprising, especially in the variety of religious faith which in the final event became apparent. Such is one obscure family – but this is a feature of so much of human life. The details of the future cannot be foreseen. As each person looks back on life, how much of it would he have predicted? We are talking here of individual lives, but how much more is this the case of the world? In the eighteenth century, who would have predicted the terrible French

Revolution and the rise of Bonaparte and the continental wars that marked his regime? It set the stage for a century of change. But in that very century of change, the nineteenth, who would have predicted the terrible carnage of two world wars in the following century and other wars besides, let alone the terrible suffering perpetrated by communist, fascist and Nazi regimes?

I mention these instances drawn from individual and public life to set forth the essentially unpredictable character of the future of man and the world. Absolutely speaking, only God knows the future. It is in his hands – and for that reason our Lord repeatedly warns us to stay awake and to be ready, for we do not know either the day or the hour when he will come. But ah! We do know the ultimate future, and so we can live accordingly. God has revealed that the most important thing about the future is the Judgment of God. There will be a divine Judgment on each and all of us – each of us individually at our death, and all of us together at the very end of time. We have been told the future, and so we can get ready for it. Christ tells us in our parable

today that there will be a Judgment, and he means those who are neglectful of God and of duty to take great notice of this fact. *"Just as weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his Kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears ought to hear"* (Matthew 13:36-43). Notice that while the parable speaks of both the wheat and the weeds, in his explanation our Lord speaks mainly of the fate of "the weeds." Just as at harvest time the weeds are gathered up and burnt, so it will be for *"all those who cause others to sin and all evildoers."* Their lot will be the fiery furnace, while the righteous will shine like the sun in the Father's Kingdom. The whole world is heading for an awesome finale and every little thing in daily life counts with the eventual upshot. Every thought, word or deed that is the result of personal decision will be taking us in the direction of either heaven or

hell. Life is not just a personal adventure, something we create for ourselves with no more ultimate consequences for ourselves.

Life is not something to be wasted in mere adventures, the upshot of arbitrary whims. If I build my successful business in no small measure on the basis of various forms of injustice, then I am heading towards the ultimate tragedy. If I am building my business on the basis of what Christ commands, I am heading towards the ultimate success. As St Paul writes in one of his letters, *eye has not seen nor ear heard all that God has in mind for those who love him*. Let us love God, then, and make every day count.

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 13:36-43)

Discipleship Notice a detail in the passage giving our Lord's explanation of his parable. It is that after "*leaving the crowds, Jesus went into the house, and his disciples came to him and said, 'Explain the parable about the darnel in the field to us.'*" That is to say, it was to his *disciples* that our Lord gave light as to the meaning of the

parable. They asked to be helped to understand it, and he gave them this understanding. This suggests that it is not enough to be one of the crowd, as it were, just listening to our Lord's words and watching him, without being a *disciple*. It is not enough to be a relatively passive spectator of the things of the faith and a relatively passive hearer of its contents – passively attending Mass and passively engaging in other exercises that nourish our faith. Rather, we must have the spirit of a *disciple*. We must personally approach our Lord in a heartfelt way, as did the disciples. We must spend real time with him, giving him the attention of our mind and heart, taking real efforts to be with him. We ought read the Scriptures attentively, pursue various forms of spiritual reading, do some regular study of the Church's teaching, and seek some form of reliable spiritual direction.

In all these ways let us place ourselves in the position of the disciples in this passage (Matthew 13:36). They heard his teaching as ones who lived in his company and who wished to understand his

teaching, so as to live it more generously. Let us not just be one of the crowd, but his true disciples.



Wednesday of the Seventeenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6-7, 36 God is in his holy place,
God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might
and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom
nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your
mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may
use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to
those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 15:10.16-21; Psalm 58; Matthew 13:44-46

*Jesus said to his disciples: "The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure
buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy
goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the Kingdom
of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a*

pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.” (Matthew 13:44-46)

Freedom The animal acts by instinct. Indeed, it is driven by instinct and cannot help doing what it does. Its instincts can be shaped by its fellow animals or by man, to enable it to do many things it would not have done by following its instincts independently. For instance, the animal setting out on its life is trained by its parent to hunt – the parent itself acting on instinct. It learns to hunt skilfully by instinct. Alternatively, an animal in captivity may be trained by man to perform various activities, activities it would never have been able to do by instinct on its own. In all, the animal does not freely set its own goals. It cannot choose among goals and devote itself exclusively to one of pre-eminent importance. Its goals are set for it by its instincts, whether trained or untrained. I mention this by way of introduction to man. Man too has instincts – for instance, he has an instinct to preserve his own life. Accordingly, he will react to threats with instinctive anger, fear or whatever. He has an instinctive sense of moral

obligation. He instinctively apprehends and makes rudimentary judgements. While the instincts of the animal develop in their scope due to influences external to it – such as its own herd or parent – man may freely subject his own instincts to the governance of his reason. In fact, his chosen values may absolutely override his natural instincts, including his instinct for preservation of life. For that matter, his chosen goals may be so evil that they could override his instinctive sense of moral obligation. That is to say, his deliberate choice may lead to his flourishing, or to his degradation. While the animal is entirely subject to its instincts, man need not be. If he is overwhelmingly subject to his instincts – as is the animal – then he is in a reprehensible and culpable situation. Provided his conscience has developed according to right reason, it will summon him to subject his instincts to what he knows to be objectively true and good. All this is to say – and this is the purpose of this consideration – that when we set man against other animals, his pre-eminent characteristic is he can judge what is true and good and choose to act and develop accordingly. His power to judge and choose morally is his distinguishing characteristic.

Indeed, this power to select and choose morally is man's principal natural resource. A person may prefer the life of a quiet scholar, given over to an intense investigation of important matters of religion and philosophy. However, he may sense a greater call to enter some political action and fight a looming threat to society. He judges that this is a superior need and a more worthy goal for his energies, and so he foregoes what otherwise he would prefer. He devotes his not inconsiderable talents to a life of political struggle, for which he may not be entirely suited. After many years he fails in his political goals, and he comes to wonder whether it would have been better had he devoted himself to scholarship. Perhaps, but the point here is that he has exercised his power of choice to devote himself almost exclusively to that which at the time he judged to be the more right and worthy. It was a truly moral choice, and doubtless he was the better man for it, even though other good things were lost in the process. This is what a man can do. It is his glory and his responsibility to judge and choose morally. Most importantly, he may devote himself not merely to determining what in his judgment is the project in life most worthy of

his efforts, but to what is the will of God. This is the supreme exercise of his power of choice. This is the highest possible goal in life, to determine what is the will of God, and then to devote himself to doing it, whatever be the cost. It is the principal purpose of freedom and is its major fulfilment. The exemplar is Jesus Christ whose food, he said, was to do the will of his heavenly Father who sent him. *I always do what pleases him*, he said. *Father, take away this cup, but not as I will, but as you will.* Jesus Christ came to establish the kingdom of God here on earth, and that kingdom is nothing other than the lordship of God – his rule over the hearts of men. It is found and embodied in the Person of Jesus Christ, and those are in the kingdom who are in union with him. Who are in union with him? Who are my brothers and my sisters? he asked. *Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven, that person is my brother and my sister and my mother.* The choice of obedience to God is the noblest and true goal of life.

In our brief parables today (Matthew 13: 44-46), our Lord speaks of the kingdom of God. It is the treasure of treasures, the one

thing we should choose above all else. This "kingdom" is nothing other than God and his holy will, and man has the power to choose this – if, of course, he also possesses the grace of God. He must be like the merchant who foregoes all in order to possess that treasure. Let us then work at being totally attached to God and to anything else only insofar as it is pleasing to God. God wants us to love him with all our heart – this is the choice of life. Let's make that grand choice, then. It will lead to our greatest flourishing.

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 13:44-46)

The very End There are not many things that are absolutely certain in life. We can't be sure how the job we have taken will turn out, nor, say, despite all our efforts, how we will go in the exams. We can't be sure how long we will live. In fact, when we think of it, the most certain things in life are those which God has revealed. Among the things God has revealed are the very last things we will all have to face – in particular God's judgment and its consequences. Each of us will, in the final analysis, find ourselves in one or two categories: either among

the just or among the wicked. That is as certain as the day. Therefore it is imperative that every day we make it our business to be among the just, among those who are with Jesus then and forever.

At the heart of this dramatic alternative with its eternal consequences is the exercise of a radical personal choice which our Lord describes in his brief parable about the person who has found the treasure hidden in the field (Matthew 13: 44-46). That person sells all he has to buy the field. We have found the treasure, and it is ours for the taking if we are prepared to make the sale of all else. Let's make that sale in our daily life so that it is all for Jesus.



Thursday of the Seventeenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6-7, 36 God is in his holy place,
God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might
and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom
nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your
mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may
use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to
those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 18: 1-6; Psalm 145; Matthew 13:47 53

*Jesus said, Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let
down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the
fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected
the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be*

at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all these things? Jesus asked. Yes, they replied. He said to them, Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old. When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. (Matthew 13:47-53)

The Judgment The judgment of God, as presented in the Scriptures, is one of the foundations of Revealed Religion. God's goodness was shown in his placing the first man and woman in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15) and endowing them with many good things. But they sinned (Genesis 3), and their terrible choice brought down on them the judgment of God (Genesis 3:16-24). The action of the Serpent in tempting them also brought on it the divine judgment (Genesis 3:14-15). Let us notice, though, that this divine judgment is expressed in terms of this world. Their lot – and that of the Serpent – is described

as a degradation of this life. The man and his wife were cast out of the Garden. Then the sin of mankind became so great that God again judged and the flood came and swept all away, except for Noah who had kept God's commandments. Again, the judgment of God is expressed in terms of the destruction of man's temporal life and prospects. The wages of sin are death, and the death portrayed is death as experienced here and now. God promises salvation, and he establishes his Covenant with Abraham. Prosperity will come if there is obedience and fidelity to the Covenant. We see this pattern throughout the Old Testament. The Pharaoh is punished with terrible afflictions, and his forces die in the Red Sea which closes over them as they cross in pursuit of the Hebrews. The Hebrews themselves are given the reward of victories in the Promised Land, and when they disobey God they suffer humiliating reversals. The historical books are replete with temporal afflictions that are presented as divine judgments. The terrible destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was above all a judgment: God had withdrawn his protection because of the infidelity of his people. The prophets exhorted the people to return to the Lord, and

they would experience his love and his favour. With this tradition and perspective behind them, we can understand the devastation of Christ's disciples at the *crucifixion*. How could this be, for Jesus was the *Holy One of God*? – even the demons said as much. Christ's enemies portrayed it as a judgment.

Even John the Baptist appears to portray God's judgment primarily in terms of what will happen to sinners in this life. He speaks of the vengeance of God drawing near, and that "*already the axe has been put to the root of the trees*" (Luke 3:9). He was puzzled at our Lord's ministry because, it seems, he could not see evidence of the divine judgment at work. But our Lord has a markedly different emphasis from all this. In speaking of God's judgment with its reward and punishment, Christ depicts it as primarily occurring in the Hereafter. He does indeed make reference to the judgment of God working out in this life. He told one person he healed not to sin any more, or something worse would befall him. In Matthew 24, there are clearly passages about the eventual destruction of Jerusalem. On the

way to Calvary he met the women who were sorrowing over him. He told them not to weep for him but for their children. A judgment was coming. However, his pre-eminent emphasis is that God's judgment will come at the end, both of one's own life and of the world. The parable in today's Gospel is typical of many. At the end there will be the judgment of God. *"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age."* Elsewhere he tells the parable of the rich man and the poor man Lazarus. Throughout their respective lives, there was no judgment, but *after they die*, their situation is completely reversed. This indicates that there is a particular judgment – a judgment by God on the individual immediately after death, together with his sentence. The rich man is forthwith condemned to the flames of Hell, while Lazarus is rewarded by being at peace with Abraham. Most notably, there is our Lord's description of the General Judgment in Matthew chapter 25. The judgment of God on all those who ever lived

will be the grand finale of human history. A very important and distinctive component of Christ's revelation is his teaching on God's judgment at the end.

Is it not foolish to live as if this does not matter? All of ordinary civil life is affected by the fact of sanctions. One cannot drive on the roads, nor conduct any business, nor do anything in society, without taking account of the law, and the sanctions which the law will impose on infringements. What Christ has revealed is part of a piece with the natural order, of which he is the Creator. There is nothing more important for us to bear in mind than the most certain of all things that is ahead of us, the judgment of God. It is inescapable, and this life is a trial in preparation for it. The result of that judgment will be eternal. The sensible man will bear it in mind every day.



Friday of the Seventeenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6-7, 36 God is in his holy place,
God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might
and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom
nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your
mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may
use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to
those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 26:1-9; Psalm 68; Matthew 13:54-58

*Coming to his home town, Jesus began teaching the people in their
synagogue, and they were amazed. Where did this man get this wisdom
and these miraculous powers? they asked. Isn't this the carpenter's
son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James,*

Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things? And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without honour. And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith. (Matthew 13:54-58)

Decision to Believe Our Lord had grown up there. His home town of Nazareth must have been dear to his heart, as having such long-standing human associations. Its synagogue he had frequented. Many of the people had been his childhood companions. He had worked on their homes, their tools and their furniture. He had gone to the feasts in their company. Doubtlessly they admired him for his exceptional human qualities and his manifest spiritual life, so quietly present. When John the Baptist was approached by our Lord for baptism, he said to Jesus that he, John, ought be baptized by him. It suggests that Christ's holiness was evident during the years prior to his public ministry. At the same time, our Lord was fully integrated into his family and his community. He was not a being

apart, above and beyond them, but was very much one of them. From the baptism of John he had launched into his public ministry, marked by authoritative teaching, miracles and manifest holiness. He attracted vast crowds and many disciples. And so our Lord returned to his home, hoping that they, knowing this, would receive his mission and his claims in faith. Their faith would open the door to the blessings he wished to bestow on them. But they did not believe his word – in fact, they took offence at him. He was an upstart, and the result was, as we read, that "*he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith*" (Matthew 13:54-58). Let us consider the "lack of faith" in Jesus of his own townsmen. The fact is that there had been abundant indications of the truth of his claims prior to his return – and they knew of them. There were his miracles. He had healed the sick, raised the dead, cast out devils, calmed storms, fed thousands. Furthermore, there was his wisdom. He was an outstanding religious teacher, a prophet of the first order, and he dominated any debate brought on against him by his enemies the religious leaders. He reduced the Sadducees to silence,

and no one could better him. There were very good reasons to believe in him, and a right conscience would indicate the duty of faith.

Yes, there were very good grounds for belief in him and they were aware of them: "*Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? they asked. Isn't this the carpenter's son? Where then did this man get all these things?*" What they lacked in facing these manifest reasons for belief – his miracles and wisdom – was a *willing heart*. They discovered themselves to be *unwilling*. Hence their mind turned by evil choice to pretexts and excuses for non-acceptance – that Jesus was but one of themselves, that he was but the person they had known all along, that it was impossible that the Messiah should come from within their own midst. Their *will refused* to accept the call of their conscience to believe, based on the good grounds manifestly before them. Instead, their unwilling heart grasped at other considerations and gave to them all the weight of likelihood. So they refused to believe and cut themselves off by their lack of faith from receiving the blessings our Lord intended for them. Our Gospel

passage today (Matthew 13:54-58) shows this unwillingness. Faith requires a *willing heart*. There are excellent reasons to believe, but the will must decide to believe. Faith cannot be reduced simply to a conclusion of the reason and nothing more, because there are always other so-called "reasons" which a man may choose to regard as justifying non-belief. A man may be aware of the grounds for belief – as the townspeople of Nazareth were aware of the wisdom and miracles our Lord had displayed throughout Judea and Galilee prior to his return among them. But he is free to choose other so-called "reasons" apart from those good ones before him – "reasons" for withholding belief. His motive for doing so may be his own pride, and this would seem to have been the case with the people of Nazareth. Their pride did not permit them to acknowledge the lordship of Jesus of Nazareth, their own townsman and companion. After all, he was no more than they! He had a hide! as we might now say.

The refusal to believe on the part of the people of Nazareth shows the power of the fallen heart of man to vitiate and avoid the

excellent reasons for believing in Jesus Christ. He had shown remarkable wisdom and remarkable powers to heal and restore. But no – after all, he was just one of us, a mere Nazarene, no more than our companion and acquaintance. Lurking behind this choice stood the hidden menace of pride. They were proud, so they would not believe. As Cardinal Newman often wrote, sin is at the root of unbelief. It must be renounced if we are to accept and profess faith in Jesus Christ.

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 13: 54-58)

Surprise in Life God has been called a God of surprises. One of the greatest surprises is what his grace can do, and repeatedly does, in the midst of an ordinary life. The ordinary life brings forth saints, to the surprise of very many. The townspeople of Our Lord were most surprised to see and hear him teaching with such power and quality in their synagogue, having heard of his wisdom and miracles (Matthew 13: 54-58). It was not what they had been used to in this their townsman. Our Lord's life at Nazareth had followed a very ordinary

course, a path little different from those of others. The way they referred to Mary his mother indicates that she too had followed (with him) a path that the ordinary man and woman can easily identify with. If only they had glimpsed at the level of holiness that was being lived within that ordinary path by Jesus, by the carpenter whose reputed son he was, and by Mary his mother! What a surprise it would have been! Let us learn from this. We do not have to aspire in life to greener and different pastures than those in which the providence of God has placed us, in order for our lives to attain a true grandeur. When it comes to sanctity, God is the God of surprises.

What we can all aspire to, and what we absolutely must aspire to, is to fulfil our ordinary duties and to live our ordinary lives with as much love and obedience to God as grace makes possible. We can aspire to follow Christ closely in the midst of ordinariness. In following our "ordinary" paths we can become saints. In this way our ordinary life will attain its grandeur.

Saturday of the Seventeenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67): 6-7,36 God is in his holy place,
God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might
and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom
nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your
mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may
use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to
those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 26:11-16.24; Psalm 68; Matthew 14:1-12

*At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he
said to his attendants, This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the
dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him. Now Herod
had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of*

Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: It is not lawful for you to have her. Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet. On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist. The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. (Matthew 14:1-12)

Satan The scene of this Gospel will resound till the end of time. Just as Judas Iscariot will always be known as the one who betrayed Christ, so will the perpetrators of the death of St John the Baptist always be known. While the shining personage of our text is the Baptist, St Matthew keeps our eyes on those who brought about his

end. They are mentioned in order: there is vain and pleasure-loving Herod, who gave the order. There is the girl who dazzled him with her dancing, which may have verged on the erotic. There is her black-hearted mother, Herodias, who seized the opportunity to crush the one she hated. Finally, there are the worldly guests whose attitude was such as to precipitate Herod to sin grievously out of human respect. We have, in that hall of feasting, an easy haunt of Satan and the demons. Invisibly, the Demon stalked among the tables of noise and merry-making. In the cauldron of laughter, illusion and self, the stench of sin filled the tetrarch's palace. Conscience was entirely dormant, and the unseen Satan, grinning broadly, felt at home. His chance to strike at the prophet was approaching. We read in the Last Supper account by John that when Judas received the morsel from Christ, Satan entered him. He would have had easy entry into the hearts of those at this birthday celebration of Herod Antipas. Both Matthew and Mark simply refer to the bewitching girl as being the daughter of Herodias. Another source from Antiquity, Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* (Ἰουδαϊκὴ ἀρχαιολογία), gives her name and some detail about her

family relations. According to Josephus, the girl's name was Salome (in Hebrew it is *Shlomit*, derived from *Shalom*, meaning "peace"). Josephus informs us that Herodias, the girl's mother, was born of Mariamne, the daughter of Simon the high priest, and the third wife of Herod the Great. Herodias was exceedingly beautiful and she married the brother of Herod, and from him had a daughter, Salome. After Salome's birth, Herodias spurned the religious law of the Hebrews and divorced her husband and married Herod Antipas the tetrarch, her husband's brother by the father's side. At this point John the Baptist intervened and, to Herod's face, fearlessly denounced the situation.

Herodias is the quintessential Lady Macbeth of history. She was incisive in her deed, and unhesitatingly used her light-headed and foolish daughter to murder a paragon of holiness, whom Christ said was greater than any other born of woman. Her resolute will overrode any intimations of conscience which may have flickered in the darkness of her heart. What can be said of the daughter, Salome? Her father by the

original marriage was Herod Antipas's brother, and they were the sons of the notorious Herod the Great. This famous Herod, wheeler dealer between Mark Antony and Augustus, had put to death the Innocents of Bethlehem for fear of losing his throne. Salome, granddaughter of this Herod, was bereft of anything like a moral upbringing. Glamour and worldly success were the objects of her life, and so she was utterly subject to temptation. In our scene today, temptation came from her ruthless mother, the beautiful Herodias. What playthings they were for Satan and his insinuations! What with Salome and her seductive romp, Herodias and her seething heart, Herod Antipas with his laughter and liquor, the guests in all their worldly finery, Satan had it made. Satan was master of the busy hall, and the angels shook with horror. The deed was done, and it shocked Christ for we read in the following verse that when the disciples of John told Jesus what had happened, he "departed by boat to a desert place apart." The light of the land prior to his own emergence had gone out. John was the greatest of the prophets and had gone the way of the prophets, as would our Lord himself. So it is that we see two great sides of the field, God and Satan. Who will win

the field? Fifteen hundred years after John, Thomas More was rowing across the Thames to enter his trial because of the stand he had taken. As they rowed he said to his companion, *I thank God that the field is won*. He had won the field because his soul was with God. He had decided for Christ and his Church.

Subsequent to the events of our Gospel today, Salome was married to Philip the son of Herod, and tetrarch of Trachonitis; and as he died childless, Aristobulus, the son of Herod, the brother of Agrippa, married her; they had three sons, Herod, Agrippa, and Aristobulus. We can only assume that her life unfolded without the light of a godly conscience. Let us learn from the horrible example of those in the hall of Herod's feasting. There are but two standards on the field. There is the standard of Christ, and there is the standard of Satan. The field has been won, so let us take our stand with Christ and bring that victory to the world of our everyday life.

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 14:1-12)

Be On Guard It does not take much to fall into sin, including serious sin. So we must be ever on guard. Consider the Gospel scene in which Herod throws his birthday party. He intended to have a good time, to please and impress his guests, and to be popular. But he was not on guard, on guard over himself. The daughter of Herodias danced. Herod acted with bravado to impress everyone, promising anything she asked for, so delighted he professed himself to be. He fell into temptation which he was unable to resist. So he committed a terrible sin and the life of a most holy prophet was ended. It all happened in a few moments.

It does not take much to fall into temptation if we are not on guard. We must avoid temptation and its occasions, and ever live in the presence of God. We must be determined to avoid any deliberate sin, no matter how venial or light it may seem. If we fall into deliberate sin,

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we must immediately repent. Spiritual progress will depend on constant repentance from venial sin.

Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 70 (69): 2, 6 O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me! You are my rescuer, my help; O Lord, do not delay.

Collect Draw near to your servants, O Lord, and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness, that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide, you may restore what you have created and keep safe what you have restored. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiastes 1:2:2:21-23; Psalm 89;
Colossians 3:1-5,9-11; Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. Jesus replied, Man, who appointed me a judge

or an arbiter between you? Then he said to them, Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. And he told them this parable: The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God. (Luke 12:13-21)

True Security If there is one thing the modern world encourages us to do, it is to be successful materially and financially. We are encouraged to make good money, to have a good home, to have a good car, plenty of possessions, a good business, a career that earns social

approval, and in general to attain temporal success and material security. Of course, to a point these are valid goals. God does want us to gain and use those things we need in life. But the danger is that in seeking material goals we can become materialistic, which is to say we can make material enjoyment and security the goal of our life. These are the values of one who believes that *this world is all that there is*. It is this danger of materialism against which St Paul warns us in the second reading, and he expresses it clearly. He says "*you must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand. Let your thoughts be on heavenly things, not on the things that are on the earth, because you have died, and now the life you have is hidden with Christ in God*" (Colossians 3:1-5.9-11). What are the things that are in heaven? Christ gives us his answer in The Lord's Prayer. In it we pray that God's will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. Looking for the things that are in heaven means above all looking for God's will to be done as perfectly as possible in our daily life, just as it is done perfectly in heaven. St Paul explains in specific terms what this involves. He says, "*That is why you must kill*

everything in you that belongs to earthly life: fornication, impurity, guilty passion, evil desires and especially greed, which is the same thing as worshipping a false god; and never tell each other lie". In St Paul's terminology, to commit any of these sins is to have one's thoughts on the things of earth. He especially emphasises one of those sins: greed. He says that greed "*is the same thing as worshipping a false god*" (Colossians 3:5). We are warned against devoting ourselves to material possessions in such a way that those possessions take centre stage in our lives, and displace God.

So then, are we striving to serve God, doing His will day by day here on earth, just as it is done in heaven? Indeed, this should be the principal objective in all we do to earn our living, and in the use of our material possessions. We ought not be spending our lives simply to gain absolute material security, a security based on material wealth which, we hope, will leave us dependent on nothing and no one. In any case, absolute material security is an illusion. It is impossible that material things make us absolutely secure, for it is only God who can be

man's true security. This is exactly what today's Gospel teaches us. *'Watch, and be on your guard,'* our Lord said, *'against avarice of any kind'* (Luke 11:13-21). Christ's warning is against every kind of avarice. *'For,'* he says, *'a man's life is not made secure by what he owns, even when he has more than he needs.'* That is so obviously the case, if only we give some attention to the matter. No matter how secure a person might seem to be financially, no matter how successful that person may have been in life from a material point of view, that person could drop dead at any instant. He is not secure. And have we not seen this happen time and again over the years with leading businessmen or politicians? Years back, at the height of his business fame, one of Australia's most successful and wealthy businessmen suddenly died at 52, and was cremated. He could not take a cent with him, and all there was left were ashes. What did he go to God with? Years back, an Australian Prime Minister went swimming, and that was the last that was ever seen of him. Our Lord puts this point vividly in his story of the rich farmer (Luke 12:13-21). *"There was once a rich man who, having had a good harvest from his land, thought*

to himself, 'What am I to do? I have not enough room to store my crops.' Then he said, 'I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones, and store all my grain and my goods in them. Then I shall be able to say to myself, I am completely secure for good now. I can now settle back and enjoy myself.' But God said to him, 'You fool! You do not realize that this is the last day of your life. And when you go tonight, all this stuff you have worked for, someone else will have it.'" He was, God said, very foolish.

The fulfilment of God's will is the source of our security and our true wealth. Let us pray insistently that we make it such. Of course we must devote ourselves to our business or profession or calling in life, whatever it may be. But the purpose of our efforts should be that what God wants done, is done. It is this that gives us security here on earth and forever in heaven. It is this which ought inspire our prayer and our principal petitions before God. It is this which is the world's security. Let us all be on guard against the illusions of false security

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which can infect our whole mind and corrupt our religion. As St Paul writes, *let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus*.



Monday of the Eighteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 70 (69):2, 6 O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me! You are my rescuer, my help; O Lord, do not delay.

Collect Draw near to your servants, O Lord, and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness, that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide, you may restore what you have created and keep safe what you have restored. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 28:1-17; Psalm 118; Matthew 14:13-21

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, This is a remote place, and it's already

getting late. Send the crowds away, so that they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food. Jesus replied, They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat. We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish, they answered. Bring them here to me, he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. (Matthew 14:13-21)

Power The emphasis in my school subjects was on the humanities, but I did do some science. Apart from mathematics, my main science subject was physics, although I did some chemistry. I remember very clearly the occasion when in my youth I read in my science text-book that *matter can neither be created nor destroyed*. For some reason that sentence stood out among all the subjects that I studied, even though

my principal interests lay in literature and especially history. I have never forgotten it, and I always found it to be philosophically intriguing. Of course, the statement has a long history. An important idea in ancient Greek philosophy is that "*Nothing comes from nothing.*" What exists now has therefore always existed, since no new matter can come into existence where there was none before. An explicit statement of this, along with the further principle that nothing can pass away into nothing, is found in Empedocles (ca. 490-430 BC): "*For it is impossible for anything to come to be from what is not, and it cannot be brought about or heard of that what is should be utterly destroyed.*" A further principle of conservation was stated by Epicurus (341-270 BC) who, describing the nature of the universe, wrote that "*the totality of things was always such as it is now, and always will be.*" The principle of conservation of mass was outlined clearly by Antoine Lavoisier (1743-1794) in 1789, who for this reason is often referred to as an initiator of modern chemistry. If, we might add, something is found to come forth where there was nothing before, then the agency for this must be beyond this world and of an entirely

different order. Science cannot account for something coming to be from what is not. Philosophy can account for it, provided it has recourse to a Cause that transcends all the causes operative in the world. I say this by way of introduction to our Gospel text today (Matthew 14: 13-21). Our Lord takes five loaves and two fish, entrusts this handful of food to his twelve disciples, and commands them to distribute it to thousands of hungry people. The handful of food cannot explain the phenomenon that followed, nor the twelve baskets of scraps left over.

That is to say, something abundant came forth from what was absolutely minimal. Of course, it was a parable in itself. God was using a particle to bring forth a great quantity, just as he uses poor and limited man to bring his redemption to the world. But in terms of the action itself, it was manifestly a work of God. We are not provided with any details enabling us to visualize the process of multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Presumably as the five loaves and two fish passed from the hand of Christ to the Twelve, it was multiplying as the

pieces went from hand to hand among them. Let us visualize the surprise of the Twelve themselves. Each of them found himself possessed of a quantity of bread and fish similar to that which had just been in the hands of Christ for his blessing. So they set out among the seated multitude. They set out in faith – faith in the word of Christ, for if they had relied on mere sight they would have felt foolish at what they were embarking on. So each began handing to the groups the bread and fish they had in their hands or held in their cloaks. The bread and fish simply was there, quietly and perhaps being hardly noticed, multiplying as the minutes and the distribution proceeded. Things were coming into being from virtually nothing before their eyes. It was a phenomenon that transcended anything of their experience, and anything the world displays. God was creating bread and fish minute by minute, and if we remember the beautiful wine that Christ created at Cana, we may imagine the bread and the fish thus distributed as being delicious, fresh and soft. The vast crowd was entirely satisfied. It turned out to be excellent food, and Christ commanded his disciples not to waste what was left over. Twelve baskets of this food were gathered

up, which may have been distributed then to the needy among the crowd for them to take home with them. The point, though, is that this was *an act of creation*. Christ *created* bread and fish, and his *creative* action continued effortlessly during the distribution among the crowds. As was observed earlier, *only God can create*. Any agency that is merely of this world cannot create – ordinary science has long recognized this.

Perhaps the first thing man thinks of when thinking of God is his power. Man turns to the gods above and asks for their aid because he regards them as powerful. They can help him in his need. Revealed Religion taught that there is but one God, and that he can do all things. Interestingly, not many religions perceived God's power as extending to creation from nothing. God tended to be a supernatural organizer of things that were already there. I suspect that creation, strictly so-called, is a teaching distinctive to Revealed Religion – and perhaps peculiar to Christianity. The almighty Creator of all things became man. Jesus Christ is might and power incarnate, a power

manifested in mercy. Our Gospel scene today is one instance of this Revelation, and it portended the coming of the Eucharist.

Tuesday of the Eighteenth Week of Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Jeremiah 30:1-2.2-15.18-22; Psalm 101;
Matthew 14:22-36

Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side of the sea, while he dismissed the crowds. After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone. Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It is a ghost," they said, and they cried out in fear. At once Jesus spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter said to him in reply, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" After they got into the boat, the wind died down. Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God." After making the crossing, they came to land at Gennesaret. When the men of that place

recognized him, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought to him all those who were sick and begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak, and as many as touched it were healed. (Matthew 14:22-36)

The Supernatural There is an intriguing situation in academia. I refer to the proliferation of studies in religion at both secondary and tertiary levels precisely at a time when the general assumption is that this world is all that there is. Nature as seen, touched and as accessible to the senses is now taken as constituting the limits of what is real, and the notion that there is a supernatural realm is considered a subjective projection. Religion is widely studied, and just as widely assumed to be little more than a factor of the inner and social life of man. But to say the least, this opinion is at variance with the voice of mankind. Everywhere, historical man has accepted the fact of the Supernatural. This modern mind-set, that all is secular and of this world alone, is an unproved assumption. I say this as an introduction to our Gospel passage today, in which the Supernatural breaks in upon the

distressed disciples. They are in the boat as it tosses and heaves in the heavy sea. The Jews, like the Greeks and Romans, divided the night into military watches instead of hours, each watch representing the period for which sentinels remained on duty. The Jewish reckoning recognized only three watches, the beginning, middle and morning watches. After the establishment of the Roman supremacy, the number of watches was increased to four. These were described either according to their numerical order, as in the case of the "fourth watch" (Matthew 14:25), or by the terms "even," "midnight," "cock crowing" and "morning" (Mark 13:35). These terminated respectively at 9 pm, midnight, 3 am and 6 am. During the fourth watch – perhaps as the faint light of dawn increased visibility – the disciples see amid the pounding waves a figure approaching them. It looked like a ghost up from the depths, and they yelled out in fear. A ghost! The day our Lord rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples, they thought they were seeing a ghost then, too (Luke 24: 37). Notice that on neither occasion did our Lord tell them that there were no such things as ghosts. He let it pass over and showed that he himself was no ghost. It

suggests that Christ allowed that there can be ghosts, just as there are demons.

The point here, though, is that the Supernatural broke in on the Natural, and dominated it. The sea was turbulent and difficult. There was only limited light, and out of this darkness and difficulty Something suddenly loomed and was approaching them. Could it not be a being from the other world meaning to bring them further harm? They cried out in fear. At this, the calm and strong voice of Christ, speaking from where he had stopped, reassured them. *Be of good cheer*, he said. *It is I*. Now, has there ever been in the history of the world, the case of a man walking on the sea in the midst of heavy turbulence? I am not aware of any such case. There he stood, perhaps rising and falling slightly with the moving sea under him. He was calm and strong, and at Simon's suggestion invited Simon to come to him from the boat across the water. We know the sequence. Peter's faith failed after beginning well, but Christ held him and the two entered the boat, and at this the wind ceased. The point here is that the world

around the disciples, so unfriendly, so hostile, so out of control, was dominated by the Man in its midst. It means that this vast world which we can see and touch and subject to empirical investigation, is held in subjection to something much bigger than it, the Supernatural realm. The world before us, of which we are part, is subject to a greater and unseen Reality. There are spirits, there are demons. There are angels and there are all those who have gone before us. This world's population, variously estimated as approaching seven billion souls, must be a mere drop in the ocean of the unseen world. In July 2015, the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs estimated the world population at approximately 7.3 billion. How many have lived and have passed on to the unseen world? I have seen scholarly figures ranging from approximately 100 billion to 115 billion. How many of these would be undergoing the purification of their sins in preparation for entry into the presence of God? How many angels, saints, and inhabitants of heaven, hell and purgatory would there be? Above all, there is the great God, infinite in every respect of his almighty being – Father, Son and Spirit.

This unimaginably vast supernatural world encloses the natural world and dwarfs it by comparison. God holds our universe in the palm of his hand. With his finger (as it were) he could crush it or reduce it to nothingness. But the good news is that he is our Father. He has sent his Son to be our Brother, and both have sent their Spirit to be our Advocate and Counsellor. We have the vocation to be God's children, and all together to be his beloved family in Christ. Let our Gospel scene today help us be profoundly convinced of the greatness of God and the supernatural, and let us live our lives accordingly.

A Second Reflection: (Jeremiah 30:1-2.12-15.18-22)

The Blessings of Repentance In a previous passage of Jeremiah (28:1-17), the prophet speaks of disaster coming to the people because of their sins. He speaks again of God's punishment in today's passage (30:1-22), but there is also here a wonderful hope and optimism introduced. God's people had been punished for their sins, but they will be admitted back into his presence and he will be their God. It is surely a reminder of the brightness of repentance and of the joy it will

bring. Jeremiah's words remind us of the parable of the prodigal son who chose to return repentant to his father. It is greatly in our interest to work on repentance all through our life – especially on repentance from venial sin – and to have that effort at repentance crowned and assisted with the Sacrament of Penance frequently and regularly. Repentance is a great blessing, and it is a great ministry to assist others to repent. Parents ought assist their children to turn in repentance to God, teachers their students, those in hospitals their patients. We ought all make an apostolate of bringing the blessing of repentance to others, as did Jeremiah to his people. It is part of the share of the Christian in the prophetic office of Christ.

Especially let us take care to repent of what is generally considered as of little importance – deliberate venial sin. To fail to repent of deliberate venial sin will destroy any prospect of holiness.



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Scripture today: Jeremiah 31:1-7; Psalm: Jeremiah 31;
Matthew 15:21-28

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession. Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came

to him and urged him, Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us. He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. The woman came and knelt before him. Lord, help me! she said. He replied, It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. Yes, Lord, she said, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered, Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted. And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matthew 15:21-28)

Christ's Silence There is in our Gospel passage today a detail that is very striking. A poor, distracted, desperate pagan woman, hearing that the prophet Jesus was in her vicinity, pursued him with her cries. Her daughter was suffering terribly from a demon within her. Nothing could be done and without supernatural aid, she had a terrible prospect ahead of her. Jesus of Nazareth was her only hope, and she would not give up. Had he not acceded to her request then, she may well have kept pursuing him. But initially Christ refused so much as to answer her. All was silent, except for her appeals. Had we not known the

sequel, Christ's silence would seem mysterious. It would have seemed that in the face of this evil, he had done nothing – and there is an old saying that evil flourishes when good people do nothing. Of course, we know what happened – Christ granted her persistent request, seeing her "great faith." In view of this and of his teaching elsewhere that our prayers will be answered, we know that God responds to the prayer of petition, even if in ways the petitioner does not notice or understand. But this temporary silence of Christ before the pagan woman surely reminds us of what may seem to be the silence of God across the world, a world full of error, suffering and disarray. The world of nature and of man seems to proceed and develop according to its own laws, giving little evidence of any special choice and help by the Creator and Ruler of all. For instance, during God's long and special choice of his people culminating in the Incarnation, on the other side of the world Aboriginal tribes were eking out their precarious existence in the deserts, the bushlands and the coasts of Australia. They celebrated the Dreaming according to notions that were far from what God was choosing to reveal to his chosen people. Their lives were

needy, short and precarious. The temporary silence of God before the pagan woman reminds us of his seeming silence before the peoples.

The question is, does the apparent silence of God before some (and not of others) indicate neglect of them? There is no doubt that God has engaged greatly with some, and has seemed to be silent before others. For instance, no one has been endowed with such spiritual gifts and dignity as has Mary the mother of Christ. He looked on his lowly handmaid, chose her, while he seemed silent with others. There are differences everywhere, which might seem – only seem! – that God speaks to some and is silent with others. But of course, God would hardly deal with everyone and everything in exactly the same way. In the angelic world there are great differences in endowments and status before God. Ought therefore the least endowed angel feel that God has been silent with him? Throughout visible creation there are vast and ascending grades of quality, beauty and being – and Aquinas even sees in this a fourth great Way to God. Within mankind, God has arranged a variety of gifts and abilities. One member of the family shows signs of

musical genius, while another has an early breakdown and for the rest of his life does not attain an even mediocre achievement. Religions too, vary in nobility, as does the philosophical thought of various peoples. Everywhere it might seem that God regards one and not the other. Christ spends himself on the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and is silent (initially) before the cries of the pagan woman. Why was Christ silent? There is a saying, attributed to William Norman Ewer (1885-1976), "How odd of God to choose the Jews!" Whatever Ewer may have meant by it, it illustrates the sovereignly free choice of God in implementing his saving plan. As John the Baptist said when told that all were now going to Jesus, "*A man can receive nothing except what is given to him from heaven*" (John 3: 27). So the fortunes of the peoples vary, but all is in the hand of the all-loving, all-powerful and all-wise God who has revealed himself to be Father to all mankind. He leads his children in ways inscrutable, including those before whom he seems to be silent.

God may appear to be silent, just as our Lord was at least temporarily silent before the pleas of the pagan woman (Matthew 15: 21-28). But God our Father has all of us in hand – in his own hand – and he is working in ways that may appear evident only long afterwards. Let us pray to Christ for his light and his grace, and let us pray that this light and grace will be brought to all men. Especially and most of all, God has sent his Son who has redeemed the world. Our task is to bring the Redeemer to all men, trusting that in the meantime, God is working to bring all his children to him.



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Scripture today: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 50; Matthew 16:13-23

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, Who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living

God. Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Never, Lord! he said. This shall never happen to you! Jesus turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. (Matthew 16:13-23)

Faith I remember reading one article in a philosophical journal in which the author, a professor of philosophy and a theist, stated in

passing that one would not attain a settled certainty as to the being of God by reason alone. He did not appear to be saying that it was philosophically impossible to prove the existence and nature of God, but he did not think one could normally arrive at a personal certainty about it on the basis of mere philosophy. That position could be debated, but I myself think the facts of the case generally bear it out. The question of certainty in religion has long been a matter of profound discussion, and in particular whether reason in the sense of logical argument alone will take a person to theism, and in particular to Christianity. A plain reading of our Lord's words to Simon Peter in today's Gospel would suggest that, whatever of theism, reasoning alone, unassisted by grace, will not take a person to a settled faith in the Person and nature of Jesus Christ. Our Lord had striven in his public ministry to reveal his true identity, while taking into account the hazards of the political and religious aspirations of the people. He was having little success, despite the stunning "proofs" he was providing. His personal holiness was unmatched – "*Can any of you convict me of sin?*" he asked his enemies. "*I always do what pleases*

him," – he stated, referring to himself and the Father. He had the total endorsement of the great prophet of the day before him, John the Baptist. His miracles far surpassed those of any before him – the only one approaching him in such miracles might have been Moses, and he, Jesus, was showing himself to be a new and much greater Moses. Moses promised liberation from the land of slavery, but never thought of promising liberation from the sin of the world, and a covenant involving a share in the life of God. Jesus provided all these "proofs," all these "signs" as John the Evangelist calls them, but what was the result? The people thought of Jesus as just another prophet, among the greatest, and even one of them come back.

But Christ knew, of course, that he was much greater than this. Addressing his disciples directly, he asked them, "*But you, who do you say I am?*" Simon Peter was emphatic, assured, clear-sighted as far as he went, and settled in his certainty. It was a magnificent answer and showed that he had pierced to the heart of the mystery of Christ – though he still had a great deal to learn. "*You are the Christ, the Son of*

the living God.” It is Matthew who reports this (Matthew 16: 13 23). If we turn to the Gospel of St John in order to understand how a different Evangelist summarizes the Gospel, we notice that it is the same. John informs us that he has written his Gospel in order that the reader might believe that *"Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life through his name"* (John 20:31). So Simon Peter had attained true faith in the Person of Jesus Christ. What he had attained was to be brought to the nations, and by it all the nations would be blessed. In this would the distant promise granted to Abraham be fulfilled, that in him all the peoples would be blessed. As our Lord would say during his prayer at the Last Supper, *eternal life is this, to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* This true knowledge of Jesus Christ is what Simon Peter displayed in our Gospel scene. Risen from the dead and about to ascend into heaven, Christ would entrust to his disciples the mission to bring the whole world to this knowledge and love of him, which Peter manifested on this occasion. So Peter had in large measure, though as yet by no means in full measure, arrived. But how had it happened? Had it been because

Simon had seen our Lord at close quarters, had reasoned well and properly about him, and had the moral qualities needed to judge well of a supremely holy and truthful person? Doubtlessly these were factors, but we have our Lord's word for it that Simon's knowledge of Jesus and his faith in him was due to something beyond what he himself was capable of. It had been revealed to him by the Father. Faith was a gift, a grace.

We must be good soil, as our Lord explains elsewhere, if the seed of the word is to produce the harvest – and the harvest was beginning to show in Simon Peter. He was very good soil. But good soil is not enough. A moral life, careful reflection, a religious heart, direct acquaintance, all these things help dispose a person for faith. But faith in Jesus Christ is a gift from God. God enlightens the soul with his gift, and the soul must be disposed to receive the gift. We cannot attain to faith in Jesus Christ merely by our own efforts, and Simon Peter is our exemplar for this. Faith is the gift granted at our baptism, and if we are faithful to it, it will take us to holiness and to heaven.

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Scripture today: Nahum 2:1-3. 3:1-3.6-7; Ps.: Deuteronomy 32

Matthew 16:24-28

Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet

forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. (Matthew 16:24-28)

Service There are so many things which man has in common with the animal that he is generally classed *as* an animal, while possessing *radically* distinguishing features. He is an animal – yes, but he is a *rational* one and he can *choose* between options. He is not subject to instincts. For this reason he is very different from a mere animal, so much so that the Book of Genesis describes man as having been made in the image (not of animals but) of God. He is, then, more like God than an animal. An animal, led by its instincts, cannot be said truly to do a work in life. It is subject to the round and promptings of its instinctive tendencies, which in turn react to stimuli. The great “intelligence” and “achievements” of, say, a prize-winning sheep-dog

or of a cunning leopard are the product of training, conditioning and instinct. Man, though, can do a work that is truly his. As a result of his judgments of objective reality, his sense of what is morally right and his choices, man is capable of works that are truly his. All of this is beyond the animal. Let that introduce the immense significance of each person's *work* – meaning by this the action he chooses to take and that to which he chooses to dedicate his action. *Choice* is an essential element in human work. *Some choice* of action is impossible to avoid for man, and he is *responsible* for his choices. His choice may mean choosing to do *little* or even *nothing* – well, *this* is his *choice*, and he is responsible for it. The more deliberate and considered his choice, the more truly is the consequent action *his work*, for good or ill. Another element of worthwhile human work, springing from his power to judge and to choose, is that his work constitute a *service*. Man naturally aspires to *work*, and his work fulfils to the extent that it is a *service*. But this service must be a true one, one that accords with man's true flourishing. If a person or a group sets out on a work which it chooses to regard as a service (and which others may regard as such

too), but which degrades the human being, this “work” is an abomination. It would have been better, we might say, had it never been born. Let us think of the busy pornography industry. All of this brings us to the all-important matter of what we should choose to do in life, because, plainly, the value of what we choose to *do* will shape and affect our *own* and the *world’s* flourishing.

If only we can latch on to this key idea, that by nature we are called to *work* in life, and that our work constitute a true *service*! This does not require a divine revelation – it is a natural realization which man’s moral judgment affirms. For this reason the secular world will highly approve the work for the poor conducted constantly by a Mother Teresa, or ceaselessly appealed for by a Pope Francis. Nobel prizes are awarded for achievements in various fields of *service* – be they medical, scientific, humanitarian. A Victoria Cross is granted to someone who *served heroically* on the battle field. There is no special merit in being able to see that *service* is the best work of man, and that it serve the *true* good of others. It is a natural perception (though requiring education),

so much so that we might be tempted to say it is implanted in man by his Creator. The special challenge is seeing how one may serve *best*, and finding the wherewithal to do this. It is in *serving well* that human fulfilment will be found. Now, it is one of the blessings of divine revelation that we learn precisely this. For the Son of God became man not to be served but to *serve*, and to give his life as a ransom for each and all. Our truest happiness lies in following *him* closely as his disciples and friends, sharing by faith and baptism in his divine life through the gift of his Spirit. At the Last Supper he set aside his outer garment and knelt before his disciples, one by one washing their feet as would a *servant*. He said to Peter, that unless he allowed him to do this he could have no part with him. Then he said, as I have done so do you to one another. This *service* is rendered to God and to others – it is a service inspired and sustained by love for Jesus. We are commanded to love Jesus our God with all our heart, and we are to love others as Jesus has loved us. All of this brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 16:24-28), in which Christ expresses the point in terms of *losing our very life* in this service of him, and thus gaining it. It is to be a close following

indeed, taking up our “cross” and following in his footsteps. *Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.* On the Mountain at the Transfiguration the Father commanded that we “listen” to Jesus. A test of this will be the quality and degree of our *service*.

Let each of us set out every day to *serve as well* as we can. Our field of service will be suggested by our concrete responsibilities, duties, interests and aptitudes – especially our responsibilities both great and small. A century back, Pope Benedict XV declared that sanctity consists in doing one’s duty consistently as well as possible for the love of God. We must *do* what we are *to do*, and do it as *well* as we can, and for *God*. This will inevitably involve carrying the cross, and “losing one’s life” in the sense of going right against many personal preferences and desires. Let us do this in union with Jesus Christ, and in the midst of our faithful daily work let us strive to bear witness to Jesus and his divine teaching, because through this we shall render the greatest

service of all, which is to contribute towards the eternal salvation of others.

Saturday of the Eighteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 70 (69): 2, 6 O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me! You are my rescuer, my help; O Lord, do not delay.

Collect Draw near to your servants, O Lord, and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness, that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide, you may restore what you have created and keep safe what you have restored. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Habakkuk 1:12-2:4; Psalm 9; Matthew 17:14-20

A man came up to Jesus, knelt down before him, and said, "Lord, have pity on my son, who is a lunatic and suffers severely; often he falls into

fire, and often into water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him." Jesus said in reply, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you? Bring the boy here to me." Jesus rebuked him and the demon came out of him, and from that hour the boy was cured. Then the disciples approached Jesus in private and said, "Why could we not drive it out?" He said to them, "Because of your little faith. Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matthew 17:14 20)

Little Faith

I remember watching a documentary film which showed a Christian sect that took to heart in a literal sense our Lord's words at the end of the Gospel of St Mark. In Mark 16 our Lord commissions his disciples to go to the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature. There will be signs accompanying those who believe. *"In my name they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them"* (Mark 16:18). This promise is

not found in the accounts of the final commissioning in the other Gospels. Luke does report that to his disciples who returned to him rejoicing at what they could do in his name, Jesus said that "*nothing shall hurt you*" (Luke 10: 19). This was during his public ministry. The Christian sect I refer to chose to interpret the promise of being preserved from all harm, including that from serpents, as applying to *them* and at *all times*, provided they had faith in Jesus Christ. So the filming included the terrible spectacle of poisonous snakes being brought into the gathering of worship, being handled during charismatic prayer sessions, and of their being bitten by these snakes. They believed they would not be harmed, for they had faith. One who was bitten on film died as a result. On being questioned by the disturbed journalist, one of the leaders calmly said that, well, it was a mystery. There was no talk of their being profoundly mistaken as to the interpretation of Scripture. I do not know whether they were charged with manslaughter, but it was an absurdly tragic case of a simplistic interpretation of Holy Scripture. It also illustrated the point that the Scriptures should be understood with the mind of the Church out of

which they came, and which confirmed them as being inspired. Were it not for the decision of the Church well after the New Testament writings were written and compiled, we would not know for certain that they were inspired, for it was the Church that determined the Canon of Scripture. So we must read the Scriptures, including their greatest books which are the four Gospels, with the mind of the Church.

In our Gospel today (Matthew 17:14-20) our Lord is presented with a case of demon possession which could not be remedied by our Lord's disciples. In this particular case, it seems that the disciples lacked sufficient faith, for our Lord's response was marked. *"O faithless and perverse generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you? Bring the boy here to me."* After our Lord had driven the demon out at a word, he told his disciples the reason why they could not cast it out: *"Because of your little faith."* Then our Lord goes on to make his point with vivid hyperbole: *"Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible*

for you" (Matthew 17:14-20). The word "Amen" – a Hebrew/Aramaic word transliterated into the Greek – means "truly, truly." It is a solemn utterance, and one would tend to think, therefore, to be taken literally. But obviously not, for what follows is a typical Hebrew hyperbole. The presence of these hyperboles in Christ's sayings is a further indication of their authenticity. These turns of phrase obviously come from the lips of the living Jesus who speaks emphatically and with colour to the people of his own time and place. They are turns of phrase, sweeping exaggerations to drive home the point of appealing to God with confidence in his almighty power. There are many hyperboles in the Gospels. Our Lord states that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to gain entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. Jewish Talmudic literature includes the following aphorism implying unlikelihood or impossibility: "*They do not show a man a palm tree of gold, nor an elephant going through the eye of a needle.*" In Israel the largest animal was the camel, whereas in regions where the Babylonian Talmud was written, the elephant was the largest animal. All this is to say that we must interpret Christ's teaching

with balance – and this means, in effect, according to the mind of the Church, and not simply by private judgment.

Our Lord's words show that, in saying that nothing will be impossible to us if we have faith in God and in him, nothing is impossible for God. God is the One in whom we can have full confidence, even if he chooses to answer our prayers in ways we had not intended or foreseen. We must not be lacking in faith, nor must we be perverse. In everything we should trust him and be submissive to his will. Our danger, as our Lord makes clear, is that we will be persons of little faith. Christ wants us to have great faith, knowing that nothing is impossible for God.

A Second Reflection: (Habakkuk 1:12-2:4)

Faith Amid Sufferings The prophet Habakkuk presents us with a perennial problem. He cannot understand why God is treating his people the way he is, nor can he understand why the good are allowed to be mistreated by evil men. And so he stands on his watchtower,

waiting for an answer to his complaints. There are very many in life who are profoundly puzzled and disturbed at the way God appears to be treating them. They have tried their best in life, and now they appear to be treated terribly by life. It could be an awful sickness involving a lot of pain and inconvenience. It could be some sudden and unfair loss of possessions. There seems to be no explanation.

Now Habakkuk received an answer to this question (2:4). It was not an explanation of the problem as to why God allows such things to happen, but it was *guidance as to what to do*. The upright man will live by his *faithfulness to God*. So then, cleave to God amid sufferings. Cleave to him in faith amid all the difficulties.



Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Wisdom 18:6 9; Psalm 33:1, 12, 18 22;
 Hebrews 11:1 2, 8 19; Luke 12:32 48

Jesus said to his disciples: "Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear

out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be. "Gird your loins and light your lamps and be like servants who await their master's return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them. And should he come in the second or third watch and find them prepared in this way, blessed are those servants. Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour when the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come." Then Peter said, "Lord, is this parable meant for us or for everyone?" And the Lord replied, "Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute the food allowance at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so. Truly, I say to you, the master will put the servant in charge of all his property. But if that servant says to himself,

'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, to eat and drink and get drunk, then that servant's master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish the servant severely and assign him a place with the unfaithful. That servant who knew his master's will but did not make preparations nor act in accord with his will shall be beaten severely; and the servant who was ignorant of his master's will but acted in a way deserving of a severe beating shall be beaten only lightly. Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.' (Luke 12:32-48)

Prayer and Work

In the Gospel of today our Lord states that we are to live in such a way as to be ready at a moment's notice were our time suddenly to come. *"Be like men waiting for the master to return from the wedding feast, ready to open the door as soon as he comes and knocks,"* our Lord says. *"You too must stand ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect"* (Luke 32:48). The

coming of the Lord is prominent in our Lord's teaching. If we are to be always ready for his coming, our life must be characterised by service of him and prayer before him – *work and prayer*. Our Lord said that we are to pray always, which is to say that we are to live with a spirit of prayer. This involves fixed times of prayer together with numerous moments of prayer in which we raise our hearts to God in the midst of our life's activities. I would recommend that each day we set aside at least five or ten minutes praying with a scene from the Gospel – which could be the Gospel of the day in the daily missal. One could read it over just before retiring the night before. Then as we rise, after making our morning offering, let us turn our thoughts to Jesus in that Gospel scene we are about to pray over. Let us give five or ten minutes to being with our Lord in that Gospel scene, watching him in the scene described in the Gospel passage, considering his words, quietly and prayerfully thinking of him as if we were present personally. He is actually with us during our prayer. So is Mary, Christ's mother and our mother, and our guardian angel. We will find that something in the Gospel passage will strike home, something our Lord says, or

something the passage says about our Lord himself. Some new realization may come over us in our prayer, and a new closeness to Jesus. Our ten minutes have come to an end, and the day's duties must now be taken up. We then take with us in our heart what we have seen, felt and realized briefly in our ten minutes of prayer. Let us hold to it, like Mary who, St Luke writes, treasured these things and pondered them in her heart.

So then, the day's duties having begun, we keep in our heart what we have gained from our brief meditation at the start of the day. This brief meditation will be better if we have disposed ourselves a little for it the night before, and if we have truly entered into that ten minutes of meditation. It ought above all be a time of presence with Jesus. During the day our brief meditation will be the resource from which numerous moments of fleeting prayer will come forth from our hearts. During the day's work, we ought develop the habit of briefly renewing and building on the contact with Jesus which we had during that first ten minutes of meditation at the start of the day. These need

only be fleeting moments but they are necessary to preserve constant contact with Jesus. They will enable us to pray always, and to live for him. Often during the day we ought pray briefly to Jesus, to the Father and to the Holy Spirit, and also to our heavenly friends – Mary, our Guardian Angel, our favourite saints, such as St Joseph. We can use favourite short prayers, say, like just "Jesus!" or "Mary!" or "Father!" Those brief prayers can constitute a frequent glance of the heart at God. In them we express the desire we have of showing our love for him in doing our best in the work we are currently performing, whether for family or employer or whoever. Now, while prayer is essential, our daily work is also fundamental if we are to please God and be ready for his coming. It could be some dreary and difficult housework chore, it could be a dull period at school, it could be some unpleasant stage of things in our workplace. It could be intractable difficulties in research or writing. Whatever it is, it should be done as well as possible, and for Jesus. Everything we do we should do in such a way that God will be honoured and glorified the more. In everything we ought strive for purity of intention: for God's greater glory. Our prayer enables us to

sanctify our work, and our work itself sanctifies us if we do it for God. We may not know very clearly what our work in life will amount to, but if each day we try to fulfil the duties of the work of that day as well as we possibly can, we will indeed be gradually fulfilling the work in life that God has given us to do.

Let us be busy about our tasks, looking on them as tasks entrusted to us by God himself, by God who will be pleased with us if we do them well for him. We should try to make our work holy, we should try to make ourselves holy by our work, and we should try to make others holy by our work. Daily work and daily prayer, all for Jesus. That is the key to being constantly ready for the coming of Jesus.



Monday of the Nineteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 1:2-5.24-28; Psalm 148;
Matthew 17:22-27

As Jesus and his disciples were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is to be handed over to men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were overwhelmed

with grief. When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax approached Peter and said, "Does not your teacher pay the temple tax?" "Yes," he said. When he came into the house, before he had time to speak, Jesus asked him, "What is your opinion, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take tolls or census tax? From their subjects or from foreigners?" When he said, "From foreigners," Jesus said to him, "Then the subjects are exempt. But that we may not offend them, go to the sea, drop in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up. Open its mouth and you will find a coin worth twice the temple tax. Give that to them for me and for you." (Matthew 17:22-27)

Citizen! One of the fundamental elements in human life is civil authority. It is impossible that there be a society without there being an institution whereby that society is governed. The forms of government vary enormously, but were there not to be a government with the power to enact laws and enforce them with sanctions, life in society would be intolerable because lawless. One of the features of the American West during various periods of the nineteenth century was its

lawlessness. Various towns and regions were beyond the reach of the law and few were safe. No one with any common sense would question the necessity of government and the rule of law in society. Despite this, very commonly the institutions of government are but tolerated and, if the chance presents itself, they are overturned and replaced by a new occupant or institution. Civil authority is allowed, but very often not in the least respected. Perhaps the greatest Empire in history was the Roman Empire, with numerous peoples depending on the quality of the Emperor of the day. Yet that Emperor was especially vulnerable to assassination and coup, and many Emperors ended their days thus, beginning with its first and one of its greatest, Julius Caesar. Perhaps the iconic example of the violent overturning of a monarchy was that which occurred during the French Revolution. The monarch and his queen were executed by the junta which went on to its orgy of killing during the great Terror. The thought of civil government and its varying fortunes in history leads us to consider the attitude a person ought have to it, and in particular the attitude to it of a disciple of Christ. There is a revealing detail in our Gospel passage today in which

Peter is asked by those who collected the Temple tax whether his master paid the Temple tax. Let us notice that this incident is only reported by Matthew who himself had been a tax-collector, presumably for the Romans. Matthew would have remembered the scene. The tax collector did not approach Jesus directly, but Peter – perhaps indicating the status and respect that surrounded our Lord. *Does your master pay the tax?* Yes indeed, Peter replied.

So our Lord certainly paid the temple tax. It is just a detail, and one to be expected, but revealing nevertheless. Our Lord respected the laws of his society. He paid his taxes. On one occasion he was appealed to by a group of lepers. He sent them off, ordering them to present themselves to the priests, as commanded by the law of Moses. He observed the laws of his society. When criticizing the scribes and Pharisees he told his hearers that while they must not follow their example, they must respect their authority because they occupied the chair of Moses. Our Lord went up to Jerusalem for the prescribed feasts. We may presume that all his life he was observant of the laws of

the land, both religious and civil. We could say that he was executed on a charge of sedition, a charge Pilate did not believe, but which for his own peace of mind he acceded to. *We have no king but Caesar*, Christ's accusers shouted, and if you let this man go who describes himself as a king, you are no friend of Caesar's! But the charge was absurd, and Pilate had quickly seen that. Christ respected authority, including Pilate's authority. In fact he told Pilate to his face that his – Pilate's – authority had come to him *from above*. Our Lord recognized the religious foundation of natural authority, be it authority in the family or authority in society. We read that he himself as a youth returned with his parents and was subject to their authority. The Holy Family respected civil law. On the decree of Caesar they had duly gone to Bethlehem to register in the census, and it was there that Christ was born. This detail, incidentally, shows the providential significance of civil obedience. It was precisely because they went up to Bethlehem in obedience to the decree of Caesar that the ancient prophecy was fulfilled that the Messiah, the ruler to come, would come out of Bethlehem. Christ recognized the presence of his heavenly Father in

the weak and crooked institutions of civil authority. He observed its due and lawful decrees because his heavenly Father ruled the family of men through the faulty instruments of civil authority. Of course, he would never obey an unjust law – and that is why he went to his death, because, despite the wishes of religious authorities, he adhered to his divine claims.

Christ was a true citizen. The civil authority plays a significant part in the life of all of us. We cannot live in society without taking into account its laws and sanctions. But we ought not accept this on mere sufferance, but recognize in civil authority a reflection of the authority of God. Just as Christ said to Pilate that his authority to crucify him had come to him from above, let us obey the laws of the land with the mind of Christ, recognizing in them the will of the Father. As St Thomas More said on the scaffold, about to die because he refused the religious claims of Henry VIII, I am the king's good servant, but God's first. He was a great citizen and a great saint.

A Second Reflection: (Ezekiel 1: 2-8.24-28)

Our God is Ever Present Consider the account of Ezechie'l's vision of the Lord, and its setting. It "*was the fifth year of exile for King Jehoiachim*", the fifth year of exile in Babylon for the children of Israel, including the king. One can imagine the temptation to give up hope after five years. It was surely a forlorn situation. And yet in that bleak situation God in all his reality, power and glory was present, though hidden from sight. Then, as a special grace for his exiled people, he suddenly made his presence known to one of their number and endowed him with a mission to speak on his behalf to his people. Not only did he make his presence known, but his power and his glory as well, in the imagery of the vision (Ezekiel 1: 2-28).

Let us always remember that whatever be our situation in life, whether it be due to our own making and fault or not, God is present in all his power and glory, though hidden. He can be relied upon, and we

must always trust him in obedience, ready for any grace he may suddenly grant us with the call it may involve.

Tuesday of the Nineteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 2:8-3:4; Psalm 118;
Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. (Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14)

The Little Ones

Let us imagine that I am travelling in an airliner. I am seated in the aircraft, and of course with me are travelling

various classes of persons. I notice ahead there is seated a prominent politician with his parliamentary assistant. Immediately my gaze lingers on that person – this is because he is well-known, popular, a good man and is likeable. As the plane begins to descend and before the instruction is announced to fasten seat-belts, he stands up at the front and turns to all, merely to be *viewed*. This helps his electoral appeal, and is obviously deemed by all to be acceptable. Many appreciate this opportunity to *see* him, and several would have been happy to *meet* him briefly. Perhaps on some other occasion I have not just seen but briefly *met* a person of similar status in society, and I always remember the occasion, partly because I have felt honoured by that meeting with him. But observe this: I took very *little* notice of anyone else in that aircraft. I especially did not bother to linger on the thought of one or two in that plane who were obviously not of much account in the eyes of others, let alone of society in general. They dressed very poorly. They gave the impression of being a bit helpless and incompetent. One or two might have seemed a little hopeless, even though they were enjoying the luxury of traveling by air. In all this, I

was perceiving persons in a certain way, noticing but certain things about them, and interpreting what I saw in but certain ways and according to certain values. Now, in viewing persons thus, I may have been very much *mistaken* in allowing myself spontaneously to rate that politician highly and *ignore* the person of no prominence. Let this example introduce us to the obvious fact that there are various ways of viewing and judging persons and things. Indeed, one of the very striking things about mankind and human societies is the range of radically different and opposing judgments on all sorts of things. One person will notice *one* aspect of something, another a *different* aspect, and then each will *interpret* what is noticed according to different criteria, values, expectations and ethos. We take all this for granted – because it is so common and normal. But reality is objective and is not a just subjective construct, and man has the power to judge what is objectively the case. The very fact of so much variety of view and disagreement ought give us pause as we think of how we tend to view persons. Let this be the object of our reflection, because Christ has something to say on it.

What is my point here? In that aircraft, I was looking at persons according as the *world* in general might be expected to view them. But is this the truly objective way to look at things? As already said, I may have been very much mistaken. The real question is, How does *God* the Creator of heaven and earth look at things? How does *he* look at those persons in the aircraft among whom I was traveling? Is not *that* the properly objective way to look on persons, and indeed everything? Now, to know how *God* looks on things we must turn to his beloved Son, for God the Father said on the Mountain during the Transfiguration, *Listen to him!* If there is one thing which is clear in the words and teaching of Jesus Christ, it is that for God the most important object of our attention should be the *unnoticed* person, the one who is *on the margins* of the world's attention, the one who is *straying* from the best pastures, the one who is, in a word, *poor*. It is the *poor* whom we must especially notice – and of course we must recognize that the rich person can be poor too in the real treasures of life. But it is the *afflicted* one whom God is especially concerned for, and we as his children must strive to be like him in this. The striking thing about God

as he has revealed himself to be is that he is full of mercy, having a special attention for the least. Indeed, Jesus who is the Teacher of mankind has said that he regards the least person as his *brother* and will regard what we do to the *least* (of his brothers) as having been done to *him*. Jesus Christ, of course, being God is the greatest of the Prophets of Holy Scripture. He is the one Moses said would come and to whom we should listen. One of the many distinctive features of his prophetic teaching is his teaching about the Judgment on all and the Hereafter. He tells us that he will be the Judge. At the end he will come in glory and all the nations will be assembled before him. He will separate the sheep from the goats and then judgment on all will be given with definitive results. He will say to the wicked that *he* was hungry and *in need*, and they did nothing about it. How was this? “*Whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me*”. They will then be punished for neglecting to serve *him* in the *least of his brothers*. So that is how we ought look on those we see about us. We must discard a worldly way of seeing things, and look on everything with the mind of Jesus Christ.

This is surely one aspect of our Lord's teaching in the Gospel of today. *See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost* (Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14). Let us learn to notice and be especially concerned for the "little ones", for the one who "wanders away", and for "any of these little ones" who gets "lost". Thus shall we be like Christ, our Brother and our God.



Wednesday of the Nineteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 9:1-7; 10:18-22; Psalm 113:1-2, 3-4, 5-6;
Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples, If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two

others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. (Matthew 18:15-20)

The Church Everyone understands that the Christian religion is about Jesus Christ. The Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ. Some may have limited notions of this, thinking that this simply means following the example of Jesus Christ or accepting his teachings. They may not understand that it means loving him for the living person he is, and being transformed by grace into his likeness. But what many do not perceive is the place of the *Church* in the Christian religion. There is no doubt that nothing must be allowed as coming between Christ and

the Christian. The Christian loves and follows Christ, but many interpret this to mean that the Church is largely irrelevant, or an accident, or a mere historical instrument for bringing Christ to the individual and the nations. It is not uncommon among rank-and-file protestants to discard one church if it is not useful and join another. But this is not the mind of Christ on the matter. With great deliberation Christ established his Church, and as St Paul expresses it, the Church is his (mystical) "body." Christ abides in his Church, and looks on the Church as his spouse, for he is the Bridegroom. So the Church which Christ founded must loom large in the mind of the Christian, because it looms large in the mind of Christ. Important questions, then, must be asked and answered: Where is Christ's Church, and which of the churches is it? What is its status and role in the Christian life, and how should the Christian comport himself in relation to it? The Catholic Church has clear answers to this, and it presents itself to the world as Christ's creation, his Church, his envoy, his representative, bearing his authority to teach, guide and sanctify the faithful *in his name*. I say this as an introduction to our Gospel passage today, because it is one of the

passages of the Gospels in which Christ refers to "the church." The most notable passage in the Gospels in which our Lord speaks of "the church" occurs two chapters before our passage today. In it (Matthew 16: 18-19) our Lord states that he will build *his Church* (*mou tēn ekklēsian*) on the rock of Simon Peter. The gates of hell will not prevail against it. To Simon, its rock of foundation, he will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Then two chapters later, in talking with his disciples, our Lord again refers to the Church (*tē ekklēsia*).

Let us then consider "the church" as spoken of in this passage of today. To begin with, our Lord is addressing his disciples, and therefore the incipient Church, the Church in embryo as it were. "*If your brother sins against you,*" would seem to be a reference not just to a purely personal slight, but something that is adversely affecting the Church. It warrants correction with weight, and our Lord directs his disciples to correct the "*sin*" that has been committed "*against you.*" The Church is being harmed by this "*sin.*" If "*he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established*

by the testimony of two or three witnesses." Christ is making provision for dealing with harm done to the Church by "*sins against you.*" We are reminded of the statement of Pope Benedict XVI that "*the greatest persecution of the church does not come from enemies on the outside, but is born from the sin within the church*" (May 11, 2010). If a member of the Church knows of "sin" that is being committed against the Church – it could be, say, underhand, destructive and calumniating talk that harms the Church, or scandalous behaviour – then that person should correct the offender. If the correction has no effect, more persons ought be enlisted to correct the offender. But still no result may be seen. In that case, our Lord directs that there be official sanctions that will put an end to the harm. "*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*" Christ foresaw excommunication, and St Paul himself in his Letters had recourse to this sanction. The point here is *the sacredness of the Church*. There is an imperative requirement that its life of holiness be protected. The Church is so important to Christ our Lord, that evils within it cannot be

allowed to continue unchecked and uncorrected. What the Church formally decides will be sanctioned in heaven: *"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"* (Matthew 18:15-20). The Church is important to Christ. It ought therefore be important to us.

There is a further indication of the importance of the Church in our passage today. Christ guarantees the effectiveness of the Church's prayer: *"I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."* All this is to say that in the divine scheme of redemption, the Church matters greatly. St Paul tells us that we must put on the mind of Jesus Christ, and he loved the Church and gave it a tremendous role in his mission. Let us then never disregard the Church in our notion of what it means to be a Christian.

A Second Reflection: (Ezekiel 9:1-7; 10:18-22)

Being Good or Being Evil One of the distinctive features of our age is the general assumption that sin is not a serious matter. Crime matters, but not sin. Sin is a purely personal persuasion, with little objective reality. It is a matter of spiritual persuasion or taste and has few ultimate consequences. One way of regaining a sense of the offensiveness of sin is to read those many passages of Scripture in which God speaks severely of sin and inflicts harsh punishment on the sinner. In the Sacred Scriptures, sin offends God — nothing offends him so much as sin. One such passage is in Ezechiel 9, in which God describes in visionary form the punishment of the wicked and the preservation of the good: *“I heard him say to the others, ‘Follow him through the city, and strike. Show neither pity nor mercy; old men, young men, virgins, children, women, kill and exterminate them all. But do not touch anyone with a cross on his forehead. Begin at my sanctuary.’ So they began with the old men in front of the Temple.”*

In the sight of God, what is ultimately important is moral and religious goodness, and what absolutely offends him is moral wickedness. Each brings its sanction. So let us make our choice, living out to their ultimate consequences these great and simple facts.



Thursdsday of the Nineteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 12:1-12; Psalm 77; Matthew 18:21 19:1

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy seven

times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned

him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. (Matthew 18:21-19:1)

Forgiveness I would invite anyone to look back on his or her life and ask, what has been my biggest difficulty? Doubtlessly there will have been numerous difficulties – disappointments, frustrations, failures – but I suspect that for most, the biggest difficulty will be that of coming to terms with past and present injuries. The difficulty will be the sense and the memory of injury, insult, injustice, as the case may be. The memory will be painful and a source of constant if submerged anger, indignation and resentment. This is a common experience of life. Those who have their wits about them will realize that this has to be kept in check, as does every other nagging problem, if the work of life is to proceed. It has to be corralled, confined to a certain corner of life and consciousness while the pressing business of each day

continues. But there the anger and the memory may or will remain, quietly festering and never healing. The experience of injury is inevitable in a fallen world, and the injury can be great and undeserved. It may be partially deserved, and partially not. An injury sustained during the early years of life, an injury thoughtlessly or even in good faith inflicted, an injury which is nevertheless perceived to be an injustice, can cause a life-long bitterness. With this bitterness comes a degree of unhappiness, and in any case it may limit the power of a person to love and serve. The one who is secretly burdened with the bitterness of a past injury may wish that he or she did not feel this bitterness, but it seems impossible to shake it off. It has lodged deep in the mind and heart and holds its position with a vice-like grip. It is always resurfacing, and memories have to be held strictly in check if a personal equilibrium is to be maintained. That is the human problem. What, then, to do? Rather, what does Jesus Christ say we are to do? Let us notice that he does not pat us on the head and soothingly say, yes, I understand – don't worry about it. It was all his or their fault. Just carry on and try to forget it. Of course, Jesus Christ does

understand – he went through it himself. But he says firmly: you must *forgive*, and forgive *from the heart*!

In fact, the matter of forgiveness of those who have injured us is one of the fundamentals of the Christian life. It may even be among the most distinctive features of the Christian religion. I would be interested to ask an expert on the Jewish religion what place does the forgiveness of injuries from the heart have in its scheme. In the Old Testament, man's forgiveness of his fellow man for injuries is mentioned, but infrequently. It is revealing that our Lord said that "*You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you....*" (Matt 5:43-44). That is to say, the arrival of the Messiah was needed to bring the teaching of absolute forgiveness into full relief. Or again, where is forgiveness from the heart in the religion of Islam? Where is it repeatedly and unambiguously stressed in the *Koran*? For Islam, forgiving those who wrong you is a good thing. But if you take revenge instead, *against those who wrong you*, you will not be blamed (Koran, Sura 42:37- 43; 2:194). For a long time

now, a locale of conflict in the contemporary world has been the Middle East. It is being fuelled by the mutual sense of past injury and injustices. What a transformation there would be were each side led by a religious dogma that made forgiveness from the heart a moral imperative! Christ lays down forgiveness from the heart as an absolute moral imperative, and the sad thing is that too few of his followers are true disciples in this acid test. On one occasion when our Lord had finished his teaching on the danger of wealth, he said of salvation, *"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"* (Matt 19: 26). The same may be said of forgiveness from the heart. We must do all we can, and ask God insistently for the grace to bring our efforts to perfection. Our ambition ought be to end each day, having forgiven from the heart all those who in the past have injured us. If we make this our daily aim, we may, by the end of life, have succeeded.

How wonderful it will be if, as we breathe our last on our final sick-bed, our heart has been freed from all refusal to forgive. The

problem is that we do not know when our call may come. It may come suddenly and with no time to prepare. We may be dead before we know it. Are we ready to stand suddenly before our Judge, ready in the sense of having forgiven all, and from the heart? Let us begin now, today, in the great and demanding work of forgiveness. Jesus is our example. Ah yes, now I begin!

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 18:21-19:1)

The Imperative to Forgive Time and again in the Scriptures God warns of the dire results of disregarding his holy will. Punishment will assuredly come if there is not repentance. Consider Ezekiel 12: 1-12. We see it again in our Lord's words in Matthew 18: 21-19:1. In this latter passage the master (in the parable) hands his unforgiving servant over to the torturers till he should pay his impossibly large debt. Our Lord concludes by saying that that is how our heavenly Father — our Father! — will deal with us unless we forgive from the heart. So, however difficult it might be, we just *must* strive every day to forgive all those who have injured us in any way. The thought of a coming

judgment and punishment for failure to forgive may help and motivate us. The thought of God's forgiveness of us, with our far larger debts, should help even more. So should the very example of our Lord, forgiving to the last those who injured him.

Whatever be our motivation, we simply must go to our judgment before God, having forgiven all, if we want to be forgiven ourselves. Let's make that our life's ambition: *to forgive all and to forgive everything*. It will require great and daily renunciation.



Friday of the Nineteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 16: 1-15.60-63; Isaiah 12:2-3, 4bcd, 5-6;
Matthew 19:3-12

Some Pharisees approached him, and tested him, saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?" He said in reply, "Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator 'made them

male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate." They said to him, "Then why did Moses command that the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss her?" He said to them, "Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery." (Matthew 19:3-12)

Marriage One of the most important of Hegel's philosophical works is his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (or *Mind*) – *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807). In the "Self-consciousness" chapter there is the first subsection, "Independent and Dependent Self Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage." In this section there is the famous Master Slave dialectic which is widely understood to be a key element in Hegel's philosophical system, and has heavily influenced many subsequent philosophers. It

narrates in story form the encounter between two self-conscious beings, who engage in a "struggle to the death" before one enslaves the other. It is a kind of parable or exemplar of the basic dynamics of reality. The "I" sees another "I" and finds its own pre-eminence and control compromised. It ignores this other or sees it as a threat to itself. The only means of reasserting itself, in order to proceed toward self-consciousness, is by entering into a struggle for pre-eminence. Let us not go further into Hegel's influential philosophy – he is widely credited with having provided Karl Marx with his basic dialectical system. Some have suggested that his idea also provided the inspiration for Søren Kierkegaard's conception of man's sinful bondsman relationship with God. Others have seen an influence upon Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas about Master Morality and Slave Morality. The point of my introducing Hegel here is not to discuss an important current in philosophical thought but to show the dominance of *Struggle and Antagonism* present in an important line of modern thought. *Antagonistic Struggle* is seen as a key to the universe and to all of reality. *Struggle* is the fundamental given, the starting point, the

initial law of the world. Now, it is not difficult to see why struggle and antagonism would be taken as the central dynamic of all things, because life involves a constant struggle, and struggle for survival and for dominance is to be seen everywhere. But *Struggle-against* it is a bad basic philosophy. This is not the law of the universe as implanted in creation by the Creator. The basic law of creation is *communion*. We must *start* not with antagonism but with *communion*.

The *struggle* that Hegel lighted on is a symptom of a breakdown from how things were made and meant to be. We must start from, and look for *communion* in and among things. What do we see? We see *relatedness*. Everywhere there is a natural dynamic that *seeks to unite*. At the level of the tiniest neutron there is a system of unity, of interconnectedness in action. Living things depend on one another, and in the animal world animals generally live and act in concert with their kind. The new-born finds itself being protected by its parent, and it instinctively seeks to be with its parent and its own kind. The imprint of communion is everywhere. The universe gives the impression of

being a system, and not just a state of vast, antagonistic disconnection. While there is struggle, there is a deeper pining for communion. In this it bears the imprint of its Maker. The Maker of the world is not an antagonistic Being who causes antagonism and disunity in all that he does or makes. He causes communion because his own inner life is one of communion. The struggling-against and the antagonism must have come from somewhere else. It is a great noxious weed that has appeared from the beginning. When we look at man, he is born into and for communion. He is born precisely into a family, and family derives from marriage, and marriage, the most natural thing in the world, it is a *communion* of persons. Man's happiness is found in communion. The "struggle" of life is above all a struggle not for dominance but for communion, love and mutual respect. Let this be our backdrop in pondering our Lord's words on Marriage and its unbreakable bond. In the beginning, God made human beings male and female, our Lord reminds his listeners. He implanted in the very constitution of the human being a *structure* of communion, giving to it the natural impulse to the unity in one flesh of marriage. So, our Lord

said, "*they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate*" (Matthew 19:3-12).

Marriage is meant by God, our Lord tells us, to be an indissoluble communion of persons. It is, then, the great sign of the communion which ought exist among men, and between God and man. Every married couple has the mission of bearing witness to the vocation to communion which belongs to man. This natural vocation is raised to a new dignity in the Sacrament of Matrimony, instituted by Christ, in which the married couple is a sign and a channel of the love which Christ has for his Church. Let us strive *not to struggle against* others, but to be *in communion with them*. Let this be the law of every marriage, and let every marriage be a sign of the communion which ought to prevail among men everywhere.

A Second reflection: (Ezekiel 16: 59-63, alternative first reading)

Personal Responsibility From the dawn of human history one of man's greatest failings has been the avoidance of personal responsibility

for his actions. Someone or something *else* is seen to be responsible, to be the cause. So something or someone else is to be *blamed*. We see it in Adam (*'the woman gave me the fruit to eat'*), down to our own day. But God tells Ezekiel that Jerusalem will be judged by her deeds (Ezekiel 16: 59): "*Jerusalem, I will treat you as you deserve, you who have despised your oath even to the extent of breaking a covenant...*" So we must take responsibility for our lives, and if we do not, we will be held accountable by God for this failure. What does this mean in the concrete? It means taking responsibility for the use we make of *time* as the preparation for eternity. We cannot halt or delay the inexorable march of time towards its end. Every moment of time that passes is a jewel that has gone from sight, and the question is and will be, how have we used the time that was ours? We are responsible for its use.

We must use time to fulfil lovingly the work given to us by God and to avoid offending him by sin. We can expect our work to be ordinary work fulfilled in an ordinary round, just as it was for the Holy

2099

Family those many years in Nazareth. Let's not waste time. Let's do
our work in life for God.

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Saturday of the Nineteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 18:1-10.13.30-32; Psalm 50;
Matthew 19:13-15

Children were brought to Jesus that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked them, but Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the Kingdom of heaven

belongs to such as these.” After he placed his hands on them, he went away. (Matthew 19:13-15)

Like Children

As we think of the story of mankind as it is presented in the Scriptures, there is one quality of character that God required, and which all too often was refused. God asked for *docility and teachableness*. Man had to learn what was right and wrong and act accordingly, and look to God as his Teacher and Lord. At the beginning when Man came forth from the creative action of God, he had to learn what to do, and it was *God* who told him what to do. *You may eat of the fruit of any tree of the Garden* – use your gifts and intelligence to develop yourself and the Garden in which I, your Lord and God have placed you – *but of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat*. That is to say, whatever you construct in the Garden of life and the world, you are not to act according to your own system of what is right and wrong. In all that you do, you are to respect the objective moral law that comes from my hand. So then, *God taught man* what he should do and what he should

not do, *but he refused*. He was not docile. He was not teachable, and this was catastrophic in its consequences. There are thus two types of persons as presented in the Scriptures. There are those who aspire to be true children of God, being guided by his word and his will, and there are those who wish wilfully to pursue their own path. The former is teachable, docile, open to and eager to know the intimations of the divine will. He is able to be shaped in accordance with the will of God. There are many instances of this in the Scriptures. The Fathers of the Church understood Adam and Eve to have repented and to have subjected themselves to the divine will after being cast out of their privileged position. Abel was a docile and teachable child of God, while Cain was not. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David and the prophets – in a word, the saints or true heroes of the chosen people were *teachable*. They were able to be taught by God and were taught by him. They were true children of God, and we have an outstanding instance of them in the ones who made up the scene of Christ's presentation in the Temple: Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, and Jesus.

To be a child of God is to be docile, teachable, looking to obey his will, able to be shaped by his grace and formed in his likeness. The child typically emulates and learns from the parent. The child typically even looks like the parent. The seed of one plant gives rise to another of its likeness. The young animal or bird imitates its parent and thus learns to hunt and make its way in its brief span of existence. Where would it be had it not been *taught* by its parent, and had it not been instinctively disposed to follow its lead *docilely*? This pattern is everywhere. I tend to think that in general the successful man was once a successful child. The successful child is one who is teachable and docile – hopefully, before prudent and knowing parents. It is with good reason, then, that Christ describes those to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs as being "children." Typically, children have numerous defects and their childhood stage is but the beginning of their life's work of remedying those defects and limitations. But what the typical child does normally have is *teachableness*. He is *docile*. This is the iconic feature of a child. When he is not teachable and docile, he is "a bad boy." The best example of "the child," is of the child who is open to

parental influence, dependent on the guidance and directions of his father and mother. So it is that our Lord receives the children with love. He insists on their being allowed to approach him. Our Lord loves them because they have the openness to the kingdom of God, which is nothing other than the lordship of God, especially as present in the Person of Jesus Christ. Further, our Lord says that it is to *such as these* that the kingdom of heaven belongs (Matthew 19: 13-15). On another occasion our Lord said that unless we become like little children we shall never get into the kingdom of God. This means becoming truly docile in the presence of the will of God, and what is this but to become like Jesus Christ himself? Christ is the *Son* of the living God. He is the Father's equal in being, most certainly, but is his very Son, his *Child* from all eternity. Jesus Christ is the archetype of what spiritual childhood, the human ideal, really is.

Let us often observe this good feature in the best children, their *teachableness* and their *docility*. If a child has this, he is well on the way to being a good man or woman. What can frustrate this eventuality

is if, the child being teachable, the parent is a poor parent. But God is a superbly excellent parent, the perfect parent, and he will take us to the heights if we are but *teachable* and *docile* before him. Let us, then, with the aid of God's grace every day, seek to be like little children in our Lord's sense of the term, for to these belong the kingdom of heaven.

A Second Reflection: (Ezekiel 18:1-10.13.30-32)

Personal Freedom The influence of philosophical thought on the thinking of society is not often noticed. One philosophical position that has had influence is that which claims that we are not free. Our so-called decisions are the product, so this view goes, of a variety of forces within and without. In the last analysis man is not responsible for his actions. While such a view has simplicity and avoids the complication involved in the mystery of freedom and morality, it flies in the face of sheer experience. We are *aware* that we are free. Besides, God has revealed very clearly and had it taught and written down (Ezekiel 18:1-10.13.30-32) that each man is indeed responsible for his actions and will be held to account for them.

Our Lord said that the one who sins is to that extent a slave. So the greatest form of slavery, the greatest loss of freedom, is due to the enslavement that comes from deliberate sin. We must therefore take responsibility for our lives and live for the pursuit of holiness, determined to avoid sin. The key is to strive to avoid deliberate venial sin, and to repent of venial sin when it is committed. For this, we must exercise our freedom. Let us love our freedom, and protect it by resisting deliberate sin.



Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 38:4-6.8-10; Psalm 39;

Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53

Jesus said to his disciples: I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there

will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Luke 12:49-53)

Blazing Fire In our Gospel today our Lord tells us why he came among us : *‘I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already!’* (Luke 12:49-53). He came to set alight a fire and have it blazing. The fire is the fire of God’s love, a love which filled his own heart and which he wishes to see fill the heart of each of us. Our Lord was once asked, Which is the first of all the commandments? He said, *This is the first, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength, and the second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.’* Our Lord came to see that command fulfilled. His mission was to fulfil it in himself, and to see it fulfilled in the hearts of each of us. It was to be a fire blazing on the whole

earth. Whenever we think of the fire of that love, in the first instance we should think, not of our love for God, but of *God's love for us* manifested in Christ. The first source of all love and its foundation, is *God's love*. We live and move and have our being only because God loves us. All that we have in life, we have only because God *loves* us. We have been redeemed from the terrible consequences of sin, only because God *loves* us. The revelation of this love is Jesus, and if we wish to come to know the love that God has for us and be filled with love for him in return, we must come to know Jesus. It is the teaching of the Church and the testimony of the entire Christian tradition that Jesus loves each of us with a personal and individual love, just as if each of us were the only object of his love. This great truth has to be discovered personally. Of course, the Christian should know that Jesus loves us, but this knowledge can easily be a mere notion. It has to become personal, realized in a personal sense. If this is to happen, we must, each of us, be working at this realization. This is the purpose of spiritual exercises, such as, for instance, daily meditation on the Gospels and spiritual reading, the devout praying of the Rosary, the

daily examination of conscience, and above all a devout reception of the Sacraments.

The purpose of these spiritual exercises is to build up a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. On our part, the foundation of this relationship is our own realization of the love that he, Jesus, has for *me*, for *each* and for *all*. This requires thought, prayer and the Sacraments. It is a great work — as our Lord said once, this is the work of God, to believe in the one he has sent. The whole purpose of life is to know Jesus, to love him, and on that basis to serve him. The fire our Lord sets alight begins with the knowledge and love of Him, which while being our own work is above all the work of God within us. That is to say, while it is true that this fire of love for God will blaze only if we work on gaining a personal realization of God's love for us, fundamentally this itself depends on what God does in us by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The fire Christ wishes to set blazing on the earth is the fire of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the love of God — the Love that the Father has for the Son and which the Son has for the

Father. This Love of God which is the Spirit of God is the Gift of the Father and the Son to mankind. He, the Holy Spirit, was sent at Pentecost to the infant Church gathered around Mary, and who appeared on each in the form of tongues of fire. It is He, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus wishes to cast on the earth. So let us pray to the Holy Spirit to help us come to know the love that God has for us, that love which is revealed in the person and the work of Jesus his Son. Let us resolve to work every day at coming to know and love Jesus, but understanding well that this can only happen with the help and grace of the Holy Spirit who is himself the love of the Father and the Son. Personal holiness does indeed require our own daily work, but far more so is it the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Let us ask that the Holy Spirit will come. *Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love!*

Let us make our own a prayer to the Holy Spirit written by St Augustine: “*Breathe in me, O Holy Spirit, That my thoughts may all be holy. Act in me, O Holy Spirit, that my work too, may be holy. Draw*

my heart, O Holy Spirit, that I love only what is holy. Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy. Guard me then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may be holy.”

A Second Reflection:

Scripture today: Jeremiah 38:4-6.8-10; Psalm 39;

Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53

Jesus said to his disciples: I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Luke 12:49-53)

Fire and Suffering

Over the Sundays of the liturgical year we gradually proceed through the chapters of a particular Gospel, and the Sunday Gospel for this year C is that of St Luke. For the past two weeks we have been following in that gospel the instruction of Jesus in chapters 12. We have read Jesus' judgment on the values of this world and his account of the Christian life. Today's gospel speaks of the urgency of our Lord's mission. *"I have come to cast fire on the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled. I have a baptism to be baptised with, and how I am constrained till it is accomplished"* (Luke 12:49-53). The "baptism" is his coming suffering and death. The "fire" is the fire of which John the Baptist spoke — the Holy Spirit and the purifying, sanctifying action of his grace. *"He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire,"* John had said, and it is a fire that cannot be enkindled till Christ has suffered. But the full accomplishment of his mission requires that countless others — down through the ages to each of us — be baptised with the Holy Spirit and with fire, uniting themselves with him in his passion and death. The touch of Christ's Cross means that there will be problems. *"Do you think that I have*

come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you but rather division.” Is not Jesus the prince of peace, we can hear it being asked? Did not the angels announce at his birth, *“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace”*? Yes indeed, but when our Lord said, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you,”* he immediately added, *“Not as the world gives do I give to you.”* In closing his last discourse with the words, *“I have said this to you that in me you may have peace”* he immediately added, *“in the world you have tribulation.”* That is to say, the peace Jesus gives is for those who truly believe, which immediately sets up a division between those who believe and those who do not. For he says, *“If they persecuted me, they will persecute you,”* and again, *“If you were of the world, the world would love you as one of its own; but because you are not of the world, because I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”*

In that sense Jesus has indeed brought not peace but division. He has brought a great division between those willing to hear his word and to stake their lives on it, and the rest of the world which

thinks all this to be stuff and airy nonsense, dreams and illusions. Every Sunday in the Creed we proclaim that “*we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.*” But if we do, then according to many, we are just sick — sick in the head. If a father wants to give to the poor some of the inheritance which the son was expecting; if a daughter-in-law encourages her husband in generous service, rather than along the course his ambitious mother had planned for him — then there will be trouble. Jesus’ own relatives came to get him shortly after he began preaching, wondering if he was going mad. How much more other families? Such fierce opposition to the one who embodies God’s message is what is behind the action in today’s passage from Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38: 4-6.8-10). The army of the Chaldeans was threatening Jerusalem, and Jeremiah was consistently preaching to the king and people what God had revealed to him, that they should surrender. Those who did not believe him tried to have him put to death. Such is the typical lot of the prophet at the hands of those who cannot understand nor accept the message from God. In the letter to the Hebrews (Hebrews 12:1-4), Jesus is described

as the one who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, and we are exhorted to follow his example. Even as Jesus looked forward eagerly to casting his fire and completing his baptism of suffering and death, in that same Letter we are urged to “*run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*” Can we endure this ongoing baptism as a true disciple of the master, determined to do God’s will day by day? He, as we read in Hebrews, “*for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising its shame*”; yet, as the same letter goes on, “*you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.*”

Let us resolve to unite ourselves with Jesus in his sufferings so as to share in his resurrection. But for this we need the fire of his Holy Spirit.

A Third Reflection:

Division, Not Peace All branches of education are useful, and one result of good schooling ought be the acquisition of a broad

education. But especially important is the study and knowledge of *history*. It is important also to gain a knowledge of the history of the *Church*. Blessed John Henry Newman once said that if a Protestant studies the history of the Church, it may well make him a Catholic. He meant that such a person would discover that for the fifteen hundred years prior to Protestantism, the Church was manifestly the Catholic Church. Now, one of the things which one will discover in studying the history of the Church is the constant presence of *difficulties* and *persecution* of the Church – though the form of these difficulties and persecutions vary immensely. For example, for the first three centuries after the Ascension of our Lord into heaven the Church underwent severe persecution from the Roman Empire. During this period, numerous ordinary lay Christians remained faithful and bore witness to Christ and the Church in their daily lives. Indeed, the Church actually grew amid persecution – though many of her members did not remain faithful. Finally, after three centuries the Catholic Church was officially accepted and became the official religion of the Empire. But then almost immediately *within* the Church there began

immense difficulties due to various heresies about the person of Jesus. People within the Church denied the truth of fundamental Christian doctrines, and this caused great suffering to the Church and persecution of those faithful to true doctrine. Of course, it was *not* so difficult for those who *did* succumb to the demands of persecutors, and who compromised their membership in Christ's Catholic Church. Amid all of this, great missionaries brought Christ and his teaching to others – but with *difficulties*. Then *more* difficulties came, with the invasion of the barbarians and the onset of what are called the Dark Ages. Over some three centuries or so, the Church prevailed and the new order was brought to acknowledge Christ. Thus there emerged Christian Europe – but difficulties and persecutions then arose, with kings and princes attempting to wrest from the Church control over features of her life, and so it went on. The tenth century was full of trouble and degradation for the papacy, for instance.

And thus the story of the struggle for holiness, and the presence of difficulty and persecution from without and within, has continued

century after century. In our own era there have been numerous forms of persecution against those who hold to the faith. During the early decades of the twenty-first century there has been blatant persecution of Christians by regimes such as that of Communist China, and terrorism directed against Christians by currents of radical Islam such as ISIL (or ISIS). There has been also a growing intolerance of Christian moral teachings by Western secular societies – especially in relation to sexual morality. Western secular society insists that certain areas of moral judgment and perception are to be regarded as entirely relative – which means that the Christian cannot act according to his convictions, if this impinges or impedes adversely on another's preferences and convictions however bad they may be. There has emerged a dictatorship of relativism. Thus do division, difficulties and persecutions continue age after age and in our day. Christ and his teaching remain a sign of contradiction. The lesson is that the disciple of Christ must learn to stand fast, following in the footsteps of his crucified Lord.

Monday of the Twentieth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 24:15-24; Psalm: Deuteronomy 32;
Matthew 19:16-22

Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, Teacher, what good thing must I do to gain eternal life? Why do you ask me about what is good? Jesus replied. There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments. Which ones? the man

enquired. Jesus replied, 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbour as yourself.' All these I have kept, the young man said. What do I still lack? Jesus answered, If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. (Matthew 19:16-22)

Baggage

There are three versions of this event in the Gospels. There is our account of today in St Matthew. There is also Mark's version (Mark 10: 17-22), and there is Luke's (Luke 18:18 23). In our passage today from St Matthew, we learn that the one who approached our Lord is a "young man" (*ho neaniskos*). In Luke's account, he is "a ruler" (*tis archōn*), which figures inasmuch as he was rich. We read in John 12:42 that "many of the rulers" (*polloi ek tōn archontōn*) believed in Jesus, but from human respect did not confess him. Our young man was "a ruler," one of the upper echelon who had a

say in things. In Matthew and Mark he had "many possessions" (*ktēmata polla*), while in Luke he "was exceedingly rich" (*hēn plousios sphodra*). In Matthew, he addresses our Lord as "Teacher," while in Mark and Luke he addresses Christ as "good Teacher." In Matthew's account, the rich young man asks, what "good thing" (*ti agathon*) ought I do? Whereas in Mark and Luke, the question simply is, what should I do to gain eternal life? But in all three versions Christ begins by stating that only one is good, and he is God. Perhaps this slightly opaque answer is meant by Christ to be a hint, a suggestive pointer to his own divinity. Why are you addressing me – me – as good (Mark and Luke), or asking me – me – about what is good (Matthew)? Only one is good, and he is God. At times our Lord was *open* about his divinity: the Father and I are one (John 10: 30), he said before his accusers – at which they took steps to stone him. At times his allusions were *suggestive* of the point. If David calls the Messiah his son, *how can he be his lord?* (Matthew 22: 45). So then we have before us the young man, one who had good will and had to that point lived a good life. He was graced, Mark takes pains to mention, with a special regard from our

Lord. "*Jesus looking at him loved him.*" But for all his good will, he had baggage. He was wealthy, had status, and gifts. How did he turn out?

Christ made him a magnificent offer: Come and follow me – and leave all your baubles behind. If you do that, you will be on the road to perfection in earnest. But no. He turned away. On another occasion – as reported by John in chapter 6 of his Gospel – our Lord announced the doctrine of the Eucharist. A number of his very followers turned away from him and went back to their homes. Here, our Lord offers to the young man a share in his life, his friendship, and undoubtedly his work. But no. Our passage today is taken from St Matthew – now *Matthew* is an interesting case in this connection. We read Matthew's account of his own call in chapter 9:9. Christ simply saw him as he was passing by. Matthew was sitting at his work as tax collector. Presumably he was not without means – his profession would suggest this, and in the next verse (9:10) we read that he threw a *feast* in his house for Jesus and the "tax-collectors and sinners." So he had a

house, and had means enough to stage the banquet. So he had "things" in his life too, but they did not constitute the baggage that interfered with his immediate response to Christ's call. Once the call came, Matthew rose forthwith and followed him (9:9). On a slightly later occasion our Lord was passing through Jericho and this time it was Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector (Luke 19: 2-10) who was involved. Indeed, Luke's account of this event occurs very soon after that of the rich "ruler" who had turned down his invitation. Zacchaeus was "rich" (*autos plousios*). But deep in his heart he was yearning for something far, far better. His riches were not true riches at all. Jesus was passing by and he was determined to see him. We know what happened. Our Lord with the crowd in tow approached, stopped, looked up and saw Zacchaeus. With a smile he addressed Zacchaeus by name and invited himself to his home for dinner. Zacchaeus abandoned his greedy life and became a joyful follower of Jesus Christ. Riches, then, were not necessarily an obstacle to the Christian life – but the rich young man shows that the things of this world can become the love of

our heart, and block out the call of God to go higher, and seek the perfection of love.

The one thing that matters, the one thing necessary in this brief span of life that has been graciously allotted us, is to choose Jesus Christ as the love and object of our life. All else has its place in relation to that. We must order our lives in such a way that *he* is our grand attachment. We should strive to be ready to lay aside all in an instant, were this required. Matthew did this, and the rich young man of our Gospel passage today failed. Let us strive to travel through life lightly, and not be weighed down in spirit by things that obscure our vision of the one thing necessary.

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 19:16-22)

True Human Perfection

We are endowed with a natural, instinctive desire to perfect and develop ourselves, and it is a great sign of personal vitality if one has a desire to perfect oneself as much as possible. Parents instinctively want this for their children, as much as

for themselves. There is something very tragic about a person who no longer cares for his own development, and even more tragic if a parent does not care about the development of his or her children. But the question is, *what is true development?* What is it to aim to be as perfect a person as possible? What are we to do to reach our full potential and so not waste the gift of human life? There have been many answers to this. Some see physical prowess, others pecuniary wealth, others the acquisition of position in society, as keys to personal development, perfection, fulfilment.

Our Lord gives us the answer. If we wish to be perfect, we should detach ourselves from all else and *follow him* (Matthew 19:16 22). The form that this detachment will take and what concretely it will involve will vary according to a person's calling in life. The one thing necessary, however, is to love and follow Jesus totally, with nothing being allowed to interfere with this love.



Tuesday of the Twentieth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 28:1-10; Psalm: Deuteronomy 32;
Matthew 19:23-30

Then Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly

astonished and asked, Who then can be saved? Jesus looked at them and said, With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Peter answered him, We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us? Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. (Matthew 19:23-30)

Happiness It borders on a truism to say that everyone seeks happiness. Happiness is an instinctive quest, a drive that wells up from the soul and sets the human being along his course. But the question is, how is it to be attained? I suspect very great numbers of persons do not carefully consider and resolve this question. They assume that happiness will come with the attainment of goals that, without too much

thought, they take up and make their own. The spoken or unspoken goals of the family into which they are born and in which they are raised become theirs. It could be sporting, academic, financial or social success, and if in due course these are left behind, other goals are taken up and assumed to bring happiness in life. But what is it to be happy? That is a very great question, and the mere fact that it has been the object of endless discussion in the history of human thought shows that, at the very least, its answer is not one to be glibly assumed. It cannot be understood as being simply the fulfilment of *perceived* human needs because this could lead to chaos and lawlessness. *All* human needs? No? *Which* ones, then? In fact, most people, of themselves, do not know what they truly need. For example, how many, relying on their own reflection, would ever understand that their greatest need is for God and the doing of his holy will? Some of the most influential philosophers have missed this point. Consider how we generally resolve the most difficult practical problems of everyday life: in large measure we rely on authoritative guidance. If we are travelling to another country and must stay there for, say, a month, what do we

do? We seek and rely on advice. So too in the matter of happiness – one of the most difficult of all matters to determine – we must seek advice from the most authoritative of guides, one who cannot be mistaken. That Guide is Jesus Christ who described himself as the Light of the world, as the Way, the Truth and the Life. This Guide of mankind abides in his body the Church, and in the Church's word and teaching he sets forth the path to authentic happiness.

Our Gospel passage today is the immediate sequel to the rich young man's refusal to accept Christ's offer of "perfection." He had come with his question of how he was to gain eternal life. He saw clearly that in the possession of eternal life perfect happiness would be attained. So, what must he do to attain it? Our Lord's answer was simple, direct, immediate: *"If you will be perfect, go and sell all you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me"* (Matthew 19:21). Happiness, then, would indeed be attained in the pursuit of moral and spiritual perfection, but that in turn would be attained by the following of him. This is Jesus Christ's

answer to the great question mankind poses generation after generation, which is how to be happy? In what does happiness consist? A thousand answers have been given, and Jesus Christ gives the true one. On the mountain where Christ was transfigured in the presence of his three disciples, the voice of the Father was heard from the cloud. *"This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."* Man must listen to Jesus Christ, and his message is that we follow him. Therein we shall find eternal life and happiness. In our Gospel today (Matthew 19:23-30) our Lord insists on the point. Full and final happiness which is, of course, found in the kingdom of heaven, cannot be attained in the abundance of riches. In fact, it will be very hard for one of great earthly wealth to attain the kingdom of heaven. *"I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."* Rather, the abandonment by the heart of the things of this world and the wholehearted following of him will lead to man's fulfilment here and complete happiness hereafter. *"I tell you the truth, everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or*

father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

I remember reading of one important French thinker who influenced Jacques Maritain. He told Maritain on one occasion that the only ultimate tragedy is if one does not end up a saint. Life is short, and it is tragic if a person spends his life never knowing wherein will be found true, lasting and eternal happiness. Jesus Christ gives us the answer. Let us have the wisdom to accept it in the way the rich young man did not. The invitation stands: *Come, follow me*, and do so generously. You will have me and what I offer. Therein will be found the happiness you seek. So then, let us every day live in his presence and grow in his love, showing our love for him by the faithful fulfilment of our daily duties. Therein lies sanctity and happiness here and hereafter.

A Second Reflection: (Ezekiel 28: 1-10; Matthew 19: 23-30)

The Love of Possessions

There are occasional passages from Scripture that enable us to get inside the mind of Satan. Today's passage from Ezechiel (28: 1-10) in which God addresses Tyre, is one such. Tyre is accused by God of considering herself the equal of God because of her intelligence and wealth. This shows the danger — granted our fallen condition — of *possessions*, possessions in the *broad* sense of the word. I remember reading of a dream which a famous film star once had — she was renowned for her beauty. In the dream people *worshipped* her. She eventually committed suicide. We remember that monarchs of various periods of history, perhaps especially ancient history, were prone to think of themselves as divine. It was the temptation that Satan put before our first parents, that they would be like God. While we may not be tempted to think we are equal to God in such stark terms, there can be degrees of this attitude. St Paul tells us to put on the mind of Christ who humbled himself, divesting himself of his divine "form" and becoming as men are, and ever humbler still. In the Gospel of Matthew (19:23-30) our Lord tells us of the danger of riches, and we ought interpret that word (riches) in a broad sense.

There is a great imperative. It is that we be detached from all that can hinder us from a total love for Jesus. Jesus must become our passion in life, and all that we have or that comes our way we ought use for him and for the fulfilment of his will.



Wednesday of the Twentieth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 34:1-11; Psalm 22; Matthew 20:1-16

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the market place doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard,

and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I

want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

So the last will be first, and the first will be last. (Matthew 20:1 16)

The Value of our Work There are different ways of describing the world, the universe and mankind. One important way is to say that it is *at work*. However, it is not easy to define precisely what it is to be "at work." The meaning of "work" in everyday English is broad. As a comparison, consider the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* entry for "utilitarianism", which is brief and philosophically accurate. Utilitarianism is the "*doctrine that actions are right because they are useful; the doctrine that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the sole end of public action.*" But when we turn to the entry for "work," the discussion of its various meanings in various turns of phrase goes on for well over a page. It does give, though, a serviceable definition at the beginning: work is the "*expenditure of energy, striving, application of effort to some purpose.*" The trouble with this definition is that it could apply to an engrossing recreation, such as a hard game of tennis or an absorbing game of chess. Still, even recreation could be, in

one sense, a "work." Man is fulfilled and gains satisfaction in the pursuit of worthy goals, and this pursuit involves the application of effort to the purpose. He works to sustain his life and those who depend on him. He works to contribute to the flourishing of his family and society in the various departments of human life, such as culture, administration and economic development. Man's life can be described as being "*at work*." If he does not work in some sense, he deteriorates, disorientates, collapses, and will die. Work is his happiness and his life. One could even say that this is dimly reflected in the characteristic state of the universe. The world is found to be, in an analogous sense, "at work." It mindlessly strives for the fulfilment of its potential. The very *order* that the universe displays – galaxies do not implode, the solar system is maintained, the earth has its atmosphere and biosphere and a broad equilibrium – is a certain fulfilment of its "action." The whole universe – with man at its head leading the way – is *working* to attain its goals. But the question nagging at man's heart is, what is the *value* of his "work"?

It is evident to almost all societies, as it is evident to man himself, that he *must work*. Our Gospel today may be seen as a paradigm of this expectation. The landowner goes out repeatedly in the course of the day and finds men standing in the market-place doing nothing. He immediately sends them into the vineyard to work, promising a reward for their efforts. That is the basic pattern in life: man works, and attains the fruit or reward of his work. It is what he finds from experience to be the case, and our Lord confirms that it is the will and expectation of God. There is an unending amount of work to be done, and God does not want man to be idle. If he works, he will be rewarded. The question is, *what work will bring the greatest fruit and reward?* There have been those in history who have had brilliance and an abundance of energy, and who have worked mightily. The results of their "work" have been plain for all to see both in their own time, and in the ages that have followed them. Will Alexander the Great's work and its results ever be forgotten? Many others could be cited who were the authors of spectacular work in life. But what does the *Creator* think, he whose work holds everything in being and makes possible whatever

work is done in the world? In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 20:1-16), the landowner at the end of the day grants to the *last* the same payment given to the first. We are not told why this is so. Nor are we told that the landowner will do this every day he goes out looking for workers, but he did it with *this* set of workers. God will judge the value of our work not according to the expectations and standards of the world, but according to his own. This means that whoever we are, and however late in the day we begin to work for the glory of God, God will surprise us with his mercy and generosity. It also means that if all our life we are fortunate enough to have been working in the vineyard of God, we must not let this privilege delude us into deciding the worth of our own work. Let us work for God with love, and let him be the judge.

On one occasion our Lord was sitting in the Temple watching people putting their contributions into the treasury. He saw a poor widow make her way to the spot and place two small coins in it. He called his disciples to him and pointed her out to them. She put more into the Treasury than all the others, because while they put in what

they had left over, she put in all she had to live on. She would have been rewarded much more than they for her seemingly much less "work." Let us not be concerned for our poor abilities, circumstances and, in general, work in life. It will be most pleasing to God if we give to him all we have, striving with real effort to do his will.

A Second Reflection: (Ezekiel 34:1-11)

Seeking out the Lost God speaks to the shepherds of the House of Israel and condemns them because they have "*failed to make weak sheep strong, or to care for the sick ones, or bandage the wounded ones.*" They had "*failed to bring back strays or look for the lost*" (Ezekiel 34: 1-11). We remember how our Lord said that he was sent to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and on another occasion he said that he was not sent to call the virtuous, but sinners to repentance. He was making the point of what was the priority. He was sent to save the world from sin. As baptised and confirmed members of Christ's faithful, we share in our Lord's mission. Our Lord continues to search for the stray and to look for the lost, and he does so through the

members of his body the Church. This means each of us. In our living of our Faith day by day in family, workplace, and parish, do we have this concern for those straying or lost, or are we contenting ourselves with trying to live a devout life in the company of other devout people, and leaving it at that?

If we do not take responsibility for this, God says we will be held to account. Let us pray for a share in Christ's love for the lost sheep, for a Christ-like compassion for those straying from God, and the wisdom to know what to do about it. Let us be truly apostolic in our everyday life.



Thursday of the Twentieth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 36:23-28; Psalm 50; Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner:

My oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.' But they paid no attention and went off- one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, ill treated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are invited, but few are chosen. (Matthew 22:1-14)

The Wedding The first image that our Lord's parable places before us is of the kingdom of heaven being likened to "*a wedding banquet*." God had promised to Abraham that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. Abraham would be father to a great people. His grandson Jacob prophesied (in one rendering) that "*the sceptre shall never depart from Judah ... until he comes to whom it belongs*" (Genesis 49:10). So a "sceptre" is involved – God's chosen people will be a *kingdom* in some sense, and "*the sceptre*" will be held by Judah till the coming of the Messiah "*to whom it belongs*." The Messiah will be King. The Scriptures add more and more to the profile of the Messiah. He will be the Son of David. He will be the Son of Man, as portrayed in the book of Daniel. He will be "Lord" – "*the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand till I make your enemies a footstool*" (Psalm 110:1). Especially significant for the idea of the Messiah was God's description of himself as Bridegroom or Husband of his chosen people. God's relationship with his people involved a covenant, and this covenant was like a marriage. The violations and neglect of the covenant were like infidelities within a marriage. Finally

the Messiah came: as Andrew said to his brother Simon (John 1: 41), "*we have found the Messiah!*" Now, how did our Lord as Messiah describe himself? More often than not he referred to himself as "*the Son of Man*," evocative of the prophecies of Daniel. But very importantly, he also described himself as the *Bridegroom*. John the Baptist described Christ as Bridegroom to God's people: "*I am not the Messiah: I am sent before him. It is the bridegroom who has the bride*" (John 3: 28-29). Our Lord, in speaking to John's disciples, confirmed this by referring to himself as the bridegroom: "*How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast*" (Matthew 9: 15). In our Gospel today our Lord tells the parable in which, right at the outset, he describes the kingdom of heaven as being "*like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.*"

While in the Old Testament God describes himself as the Bridegroom and the people as his spouse, in our parable today God is now the King and it is his Son who is the Bridegroom. While the Son is

distinct from the King, of course, the Son assumes the relationship with the people which the God the King had with them in the Old Testament. In fact, the parable assumes that this was always the plan. Moreover, the kingdom is described as a feast, and in this it is the fulfilment of what the prophet Isaiah had spoken of. *"On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine, the best of meats and the finest of wines"* (Isaiah 25: 6). It will be a banquet of immense joy, and our Lord makes clear that it is a wedding banquet. The parable also broadly covers salvation history and its tragedies of refusal. Invitations had gone out, but they were roughly refused. *"He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'* But they paid no attention and went off- one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, ill treated them and killed them."

This brought down a divine judgment on those

specially chosen people: "*The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.*" It illustrates the wonderful prospects that our being chosen by God offer us, and it also illustrates the sombre doom that our neglect and refusal will bring. The king sends out his emissaries to bring in all they can find – an obvious allusion to the mission of the Church to the world. All mankind is called to enter the kingdom. This time they come and the wedding hall is filled – but still, one is found unprepared, untidy, unworthy. So while all are called, all must be found worthy. The kingdom constitutes a wonderful future, but we must so live as to be judged worthy of admittance.

Let us understand the glory of which we are part. By baptism we are already members of Christ's mystical body the Church. We are in him and he is in us. We are members of his bride the Church, and he is the Bridegroom. The kingdom will be like a wedding feast, celebrating the spiritual espousal of Christ with his Church. Let us make it the principal object of our life, to be wearing a proper wedding

garment. That is to say, we must put on the Person of Jesus Christ, striving to be like him down to the inmost core of our mind, heart and soul. To it, then!

A Second Reflection: (Ezekiel 36:23-28)

The Coming of the Sanctifier One of the keystone passages of the Old Testament is that of Ezekiel 36: 23-28. It foretells the coming of the Holy Spirit as the Sanctifier. He would be the Gift not just to particular individuals enabling them to fulfil certain key missions on God's behalf such as to prophesy (as a prophet) or to rule (as a judge such as Samson, or a king such as David). He would be sent to make holy the hearts of all God's people and cleanse them of their sins. He would come as the great Sanctifier of all who believed. Let us notice in the passage that God would do this precisely to manifest his holiness: "*I mean to display the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned among them.*"

So having received the Holy Spirit, as we have at our Baptism and Confirmation, let us be resolved every day to seek personal sanctity through his grace, knowing that we will thus glorify God and show forth his holiness. In a world of sin that has lost the sense of sin and that cares not greatly for holiness as such, while it passingly refers to God, let us bear witness to a God who is present and who is holy. Be holy, God said, for I am holy.



Friday of the Twentieth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 24; Matthew 22:34-40

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest

commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:34 40)

Love Our Lord had been triumphant in debate. In the same chapter as our Gospel passage today, we read that "*the Pharisees went off and began to plot how they might trap Jesus in speech. They sent their disciples to him, accompanied by Herodian sympathizers*" with their trick question about the religious legality of paying taxes to the Roman authority. Whatever answer Jesus gave, they thought, they would have him. His reply confounded them: "*give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.*" Then "*that same day some Sadducees*" came with their question - a puzzle about the woman who married seven times. How could there be a resurrection if she had seven husbands to live with at that great Day? Once again, they were silenced, and the crowd was held spellbound by Christ's teaching. We read that "*when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered in a body*" before him. So while on the previous occasion

they had sent their disciples with the trap question they had prepared, this time they came themselves and together – perhaps for mutual support and to pit their united intellects against the supposed prophet. The question posed to him this time was a fundamental one, and it was a lawyer among them who put it. It concerned the Law, and which of its commandments was the greatest. The fact was that Christ by his actions and example was calling into question their own teaching on the Law, and the religious weight of the numerous prescriptions that were handed on and enforced by the scribes and Pharisees. Christ disregarded the elaborate and quasi-ceremonial washing before meals. He ignored their insistence on the way the Sabbath rest was to be observed, himself curing on the Sabbath and ordering those cured to take up their mats on the Sabbath day and go home carrying them. His disciples were allowed by him to pick ears of corn on the Sabbath. These matters were of great moment for them. What, then, was the greatest commandment of the Law? It was an important encounter.

Christ immediately quoted from the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. As such, he was drawing from inspired writings that were accepted by all – by the Pharisees and the Sadducees – and which were commonly attributed to Moses himself. The teaching of Moses was taken as contained in the Torah (the Pentateuch) and it was this that our Lord immediately cited. The first of all the commandments is, Christ tells them, that which is stated in Deuteronomy 6: 5. The Lord alone is God, and you shall *love* him with all your heart, soul and strength. This, presented as from the mouth of Moses himself, follows the text of the Ten Commandments according to the version given in this book. It also follows God's directive to Moses that he transmit his commands to the people. Deuteronomy is clear that Moses taught that the observance of God's commandments was to be a work of *love*. This was the true Mosaic spirit, and this was the first thing God required of his people in the commandments he had given them. Though our Lord was not asked for a "second" commandment, he proceeded to give it because it related to what stood high in his own teaching: man's dealings with his neighbour. This itself shows how important this is in

Christ's revelation. Our Lord lit upon a single sentence in what was a multitude of prescriptions in the book of Leviticus, and all of them were commands given by God to Moses – though not ranked in order of importance. Christ firmly identified which of all of them was of pre-eminent importance, surpassed only by the command to love God with all one's heart. It was that contained in the second part of a specific verse, 19:18: *You shall love your neighbour as yourself*. So in his reply to the assembled scribes and Pharisees – the masters and leaders of religious practice in the nation – Christ gave the key to the interpretation of the Law of Moses. The Law of God given to Moses and explained by Moses himself to the chosen people of God was fundamentally *a law of love: love* for God himself and *love* for neighbour as oneself.

The exemplar of the teachings of Moses, the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms, is Jesus Christ. He is not merely yet another prophet, nor merely the greatest of them. Indeed, he is not merely another Moses, nor merely the one who, as "The Prophet" whom Moses

foretold, surpasses Moses himself. He is the Son of God and the Redeemer of man. Our calling is to contemplate him, learn from him, and with the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit, to become more and more like him in love – love for God and love of neighbour. Let us make that our daily project, then!

A Second Reflection: (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

The Promise of the Sanctifier One of the most striking of the Old Testament prophecies is that in which Ezekiel is granted a vision of the condition of God's people. They are a valley full of bones (Ezekiel 37: 1-14). But the prophecy itself is about the power of God and how God will manifest his power in his mercy. These bones will take life and will become an immense army through the breath coming from God. This powerful breath coming as a gift of God is surely a portent of the Holy Spirit who would come to Christ's disciples and make of them a new people of God, Christ's Church, and through the ministry of the Church and the Sacrament of Baptism he would come to mankind. He comes to give life where there is little or no life.

We have been given that Holy Spirit, and we ought therefore look upon our weakness, especially our spiritual weakness, with hope and optimism born of *faith in the power of God*. God shows us his power in his deeds of mercy. The greatest deed of divine mercy is the gift and the work of our sanctification, to which we are all called. Every day we ought begin again the great quest of life, with high aims and great desires, the quest for personal sanctity. It will come through our daily efforts and the grace of God.



Saturday of the Twentieth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 43:1-7; Psalm 84; Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to

move them. Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the market places and to have men call them 'Rabbi'. But you are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father', for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher', for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23: 1-12)

Humility

At times one sees references to Jesus as a social revolutionary who opposed authority in society and religion, attempting to overturn the corrupt institutions of his time and place. There is no doubt that the religious authorities felt threatened by Jesus – Pilate could see clearly that their implacable hostility was due to jealousy. The people hung on his words and were struck by his holy

authority. The core religious leadership (though not all the leaders, by any means) hated him. But it must be remembered that our Lord in no way opposed their office and class as such. In our Gospel he commands respect for their office and an obedience to their proper and best teachings, which is to say, in the legitimate exercise of their office. *"Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you."* He himself is found dining in the home of Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees may be largely credited with enforcing in the nation the Sabbath observance, which was a linchpin of Jewish life. But, he says, *"do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach."* So our Lord's principal critique of the scribes and Pharisees was of their own practice of religion, and the bad example they gave of self-exaltation. Now, while our Lord in our passage today commands religious obedience to them, we know from elsewhere in the Gospels that he did criticize many of their prescriptions on how the Sabbath was to be observed, their prescriptions on the practice of Corban, and various other matters. But

it was the heart of their religion which our Lord especially condemned. They fiddled and fussed with human regulations which were meant to protect the weighty matters of God's Law, but forgot and neglected in their own lives those weighty matters of love, justice and true adoration of God. They lived in self-exaltation. John the Baptist called them a brood of vipers, and our Lord called them white-washed sepulchres. Our Lord feared the contagion of their example, for they were the leaders. He did not want his disciples to be seeking their own glory in their religion.

Accordingly, he says, *"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the market places and to have men call them 'Rabbi'."* This self-exaltation was at the root of their oppression of others precisely in religion. *"They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."* The burdens of religion

which they imposed enforced their sense and practice of power. They gloried in their titles and made of them a means of personal exaltation. As the religious leaders they did not serve, but sought to be served. Christ's disciples were not to take their cue from them. *"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father', for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher', for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant."* Our Lord was not condemning the use of titles as such. He himself gave a title to Simon: it was Peter, the Rock. Simon thenceforth was known for this *title* and it was his by Christ's designation. Christ called James and John, "sons of thunder." He gave to John the Baptist the title of "prophet." He said to his disciples that he himself was indeed their "Master and Lord". When speaking to Nicodemus he acknowledged that he, Nicodemus, was "a teacher in Israel," and doubtless our Lord would have allowed Nicodemus to be addressed as such. What our Lord was condemning was the self-exaltation in such practices. These titles ought to have been the

inspiration and occasion of humble service. At the Last Supper, when our Lord concluded his washing of the feet of his disciples, he said, you call me *Master and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am*. So it was right to use these titles, but they expressed humble service. It was legitimate for his disciples to use appropriate titles (such as *Apostle, Rock*, and others such as *Christian* in later history) provided they expressed Christ-like service and humility before God and man.

Life is short and eternity is long. Let us use every day to grow in the spirit of Christ, who left aside the glory and position that was his as God and became as we are, indeed humbler still, even to death on a cross. But God raised him up. Thus does our Lord conclude his words with this ominous and yet exhilarating dictum: "*The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted*" (Matthew 23: 1-12). Let us make that the programme of our everyday life.

Second reflection: (Ezekiel 43:1-7)

Giving Glory to God One of our favourite prayers ought be that which we repeat during the Rosary: "*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.*" We are created to give glory to God, and our happiness will lie in giving God more and more glory. St Ignatius Loyola coined this great caption for the generous Christian: *All for the greater glory of God!* One of the striking features of the visions of the prophet Ezechiel is their revelation of God's glory. In ch.43: 1-7, the prophet tells us that he "*saw the glory of the God of Israel approaching from the east.*" The "*vision was like the one I had seen*" previously. He tells us that "*the glory of the Lord arrived at the Temple*", and he "*saw the glory of the Lord fill the Temple.*" So, through the prophet, God was impressing upon his people his *glory*, and their vocation to recognise it especially as connected with his presence in the Temple.

Let us cultivate in our hearts the desire to do all for the greater glory of God. It will involve recognising and honouring with profound reverence his very presence, wherever it is — and we are enlightened

in this by our Faith. He is present in our souls if we are in the state of grace. He is present in the Tabernacle of our churches, in the Sacraments, in the Priesthood and its ministry. He is present in so many ways in his body the Church. Let us live each day in such a way that God will be honoured and glorified, and that through us he will be enabled to glorify his name.



Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 66:18-21; Psalm 117:1, 2;
 Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13; Luke 13:22-30

Jesus passed through towns and villages, teaching as he went and making his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" He answered them, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be

strong enough. After the master of the house has arisen and locked the door, then will you stand outside knocking and saying, 'Lord, open the door for us.' He will say to you in reply, 'I do not know where you are from. And you will say, 'We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets.' Then he will say to you, 'I do not know where you are from. Depart from me, all you evildoers!' And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out. And people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God. For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." (Luke 13:22-30)

The Narrow Door

One cannot help but notice that in a large proportion of TV current affairs programmes, it is the *moral* dimension that is portrayed and discussed. It could be some malpractice in a large company. It could be some corruption in a government department or in some police department, or whatever. This is not to say that the

moral judgment the programme makes on such ethical issues is generally correct. But it does show how fundamental is the moral and ethical dimension to all human activity, be it personal, be it in the family or in society at large. Moral judgments and the lack of them lead to great good or evil in society, war, massive company frauds, infidelity in the home, or by contrast, great and beautiful developments in society. Society hangs on the action of the conscience. So do our eternal prospects. In his famous *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1875), Cardinal Newman described conscience as nature's ('the aboriginal') vicar of Christ. The narrow door is, in the first instance, obedience to the voice of conscience. Our conscience is the power of our mind to judge whether what we are intending to do, or are now doing, or have already done, is morally good or bad. At the heart of our conscience, and pervading all its judgments, is the instinctive awareness and judgment that we are obliged to follow faithfully whatever we know to be objectively just and right. What in practice is just and right is known by the prudent exercise of our moral judgment, and is revealed to us in the teaching of Christ and his Church. If we are aware that we do not

yet know what is morally right in any matter that we must act upon, our conscience tells us that we should try to determine it from the most authoritative and reliable sources. If we do not form our conscience in this manner when we sense that we should, we know in our conscience that we shall be held to account for the good we have failed to do and the evil we have done by our culpably mistaken judgment. It is so important in everyday life that we learn to live by a sensitive, upright and properly informed conscience.

The properly formed conscience is the first narrow door that our Lord refers to in the Gospel. By means of the conscience we attain to knowledge of the objective moral order. It is manifestly wrong to think that the only objective facts are physical ones. Moral laws are just as factual. It is plain and a moment's reflection makes clear, that the life of individuals and of society depends for its wellbeing on obedience to a properly formed conscience apprehending the objective moral law. There are two dangers we must avoid. Firstly, there is the danger of choosing to ignore one's conscience when the following of it will be

inconvenient or costly. In this case, the voice of conscience is ignored and other considerations are allowed to hold sway. Rather, our truest flourishing depends on our faithfully attending to our best conscience, whatever be the cost. The second danger is to fail to take steps to enlighten one's conscience by consulting the best sources, so as to ensure that one's conscience will guide us to the knowledge of what is objectively right and good. Apart from our own conscientious efforts to judge aright, the principal sources are the advice of prudent and upright persons, and the formal teaching of the Church when speaking in Christ's name. This is important because, as mentioned above, the properly disposed and informed conscience is, in the context of our human nature, the original representative of God (or, to use Newman's expression, "the aboriginal vicar of Christ"). The Creator has shown by the entire history of man, by his providence, and by his historical and supernatural revelation, that typically he speaks to man through his representatives. The chosen people heard from properly accredited prophets what was the will of God. The greatest of his representatives was his own divine Son become man and now abiding in the Church,

his body. Conscience is his original and natural messenger and representative, but of course it must be a conscience that acts prudently and which is committed to being properly informed. This is the conscience equipped to grasp objective moral truth.

Therefore our union with Christ and our path to sanctity will depend on our fidelity to the conscience in all its detail, provided we understand the conscience in the way described. Our Lord tells us in the Gospel that we are to try our best to "*enter by the narrow door, because, I tell you, many will try to enter and will not succeed*" (Luke 13: 22-30). The narrow door is the correctly formed conscience which apprehends moral duty and God's revelation as it comes to us through Christ and his teaching Church. Let us ask our Lord and our Lady to help us every day to try our best to enter by this narrow gate that leads to life here and hereafter.



Monday of the Twenty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-5.11-12; Psalm 95;
Matthew 23:13-22

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You lock the Kingdom of heaven before men. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to enter. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you

hypocrites. You traverse sea and land to make one convert, and when that happens you make him a child of Gehenna twice as much as yourselves. "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If one swears by the temple, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gold of the temple, one is obligated.' Blind fools, which is greater, the gold, or the temple that made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If one swears by the altar, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gift on the altar, one is obligated.' You blind ones, which is greater, the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? One who swears by the altar swears by it and all that is upon it; one who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it; one who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who is seated on it." (Matthew 23:13-22)

Blind! We read in the Gospel of St Mark (10: 46-52) that as Jesus was passing out of Jericho with his disciples and a considerable number of people, a blind beggar was sitting by the road begging. He was utterly blind and unable to support himself. He depended entirely on begging. He caught the news that the one passing by was none other

than Jesus of Nazareth, and despite the crowd his loud, repeated and insistent shouts carried and reached the ears of Jesus. "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" At this, Jesus stopped. Let us imagine him stopping, with concern filling his heart. He had heard, and immediately detected the appeal of distress. The crowd gradually stopped too. Then the voice of Jesus was heard: *bring him to me!* The blind man suddenly found that the noise around him subsided, and he was told to come, for Jesus was calling for him. He threw aside his cloak and rose, head and heart afire with expectation, and was led to Jesus. A calm, strong and compassionate voice asked him, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" We know the sequel. Bar Timaeus was cured, and he presumably became a disciple, for he "*followed Jesus along the way.*" Our Lord was full of compassion for his state of blindness, and his curing led to an immediate discipleship, which indicated that in the midst of his blindness there was a religious and willing heart. But in our Gospel today (Matthew 23:13-22), there is a different kind of blindness which confronted our Lord. There were "blind" people who were implacably opposed to him and certainly in no way looked to him for

healing. While the blind beggar knew he was blind, the scribes and Pharisees to whom our Lord was speaking were blind, but thought they saw clearly. Jesus told them to their very faces that they were blind (*tuphloi*), and repeated it three times with biting force. "*Woe to you, blind guides!*" They were "fools and blind (*mōroi kai tuphloi*)!" The word "fools" (*mōroi*) was particularly harsh. The English word "moron" – an adult whose mental development is arrested, or even a degenerate fool, derives from this Greek word.

The point about their blindness, though, was that they were leading others into blindness. "*You lock the Kingdom of heaven before men. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to enter.*" Again – and our Lord's voice fills with indignation rising from a heart filled with compassion for the needy and helpless – he says to them, "*You traverse sea and land to make one convert, and when that happens you make him a child of Gehenna twice as much as yourselves.*" In their case, the blindness that has enveloped them has its origin in personal choice and sin. They are hypocrites

(*hupokritai*)! They pose as religious and zealous for God, but their religion is mere self-aggrandizement. Twice our Lord in this passage tells them that they are hypocrites. Their religion is a show, a mask, a front, whereas their hearts are far from God. Their religion is a means of self-seeking. It is hypocritical. Let it be remembered that our Lord does not explicitly say that *all* the scribes and Pharisees were thus. Nicodemus was a disciple and he was a Pharisee. Joseph of Arimathea was a "counsellor" (*bouleutēs*), suggesting that he may have been a member of the Sanhedrin (Luke 23: 50). Luke tells us that he was good and righteous, that he did not agree with the others and that he awaited the kingdom of God. Luke praises him highly. St John tells us that many of "the rulers" believed in Jesus but because of a fear of these Pharisees, did not confess to it (John 12: 42). So those to whom our Lord addressed himself were blind, and this was because of serious sin, a sin of pride and self-exaltation. They sought their own glory and not that of God. Accordingly, their religious judgments and priorities went entirely astray. Blindly, *"you say, 'If one swears by the altar, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gift on the altar, one is*

obligated.' You blind ones, which is greater, the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? One who swears by the altar swears by it and all that is upon it; one who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it; one who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who is seated on it" (Matthew 23:13-22).

Deliberate sin is the greatest affliction that can strike the human heart, and it has ramifications throughout the person. Among its effects is blindness. While Christ was able to cure the blindness of Bar Timaeus at a mere word, in a certain sense he was helpless before the sinful blindness of these particular scribes and Pharisees. This willful blindness resisted God and it led others astray, even to perdition. On another occasion our Lord told his enemies that their father was the devil, and that he, the devil, was a liar and a murderer from the beginning. The devil too is blind, but it is a blindness arising from total sin. Let us flee from all deliberate sin, then! It is the path to a blindness that leads to Hell.

A Second Reflection: (2 Thessalonians 1:1-5. 11-12)

The Cross the Prelude to Glory Let us notice in this passage from St Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians (ch.1: 1-5.11-12) the pride he takes in the Thessalonians for their constancy and faith under all their "*persecutions and troubles.*" But notice also what he says to be the purpose of it all in terms of the judgment of God. The "*purpose of it is that you may be found worthy of the kingdom of God; it is for the sake of this that you are suffering now.*" So their sufferings are intended by God as the prelude of their future glory in Christ. Moreover, by means of their sufferings God would be glorified in them – "*in this way the name of our Lord Jesus Christ will be glorified in you and you in him.*" The suffering of the Christian mirrors and shares in the pattern of our Lord's life. The cross was the prelude to glory. We ought pray for the great grace of appreciating this profoundly so that when suffering comes we will know that it has been permitted by God for our sanctification, and that will be for his

glory. Knowing this we will not be resentful and unforgiving, but grateful. This will be the result of faith and will result in greater faith.

The saints knew that the cross is a blessing. St Rose of Lima wrote that the Lord communicated to her that "*without the burden of affliction one cannot arrive at the height of glory; that the measure of heavenly gifts is increased in proportion to the labours undertaken;.. without the cross there is no road to heaven.*" She continues: "*I tell you most solemnly: no grace without suffering.*" (Second Reading from the Office of Readings for August 23). This is a remarkable feature of the divine plan which we would never have known had it not been revealed in Christ. Let us pray for the grace to appreciate our Lord's words that being his disciple involves taking up the cross daily and following in his footsteps.



Tuesday of the Twenty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3.14-17; Psalm 95;
Matthew 23: 23-26

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have

practised the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. (Matthew 23:23-26)

Christ the Fulfilment

Sometimes the impression is given by certain Christians that the Old Testament was simply annulled and replaced by the Law of Christ. The impression can be given (without it meaning to be given) that the “God of the Old Testament” was a mistake, and that the real revelation of God and his character was that given in the New Testament. The God of the Old Testament was, for instance, a God of wrath whereas the God of the New Testament was a God of love. But no – Christ was very clear that he had not come to destroy the Law of Moses but to fulfil it. He was the new and definitive Moses bringing man not just the Law, but grace and truth. He certainly did not quash Moses. So much was this so that it became a major point

of controversy within the infant Church whether Gentile converts were required to observe various practical points of Jewish observance such as the eating of “unclean” foods and circumcision. The issue became one of getting to the heart of the Christian faith, distinguishing essentials from what was marginal and dispensable, and truly fulfilling the Law of God as God intended. We have something of a case in point in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 23: 23-26), in which our Lord assails the teachers of the law and the Pharisees for their blindness in missing the wood for the trees. *You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness.* Was our Lord condemning giving “a tenth of their spices”? No – for in the next sentence he tells them that they should not neglect to give a tenth of their spices: *You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former.* The Old Testament had laid down the obligation to tithe: *"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' 'In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that*

there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it'"

(Malachi 3:8-10). The prophet Malachi accused the people of *robbing God* for not giving tithes and offerings. The *whole* tithe should be brought to the storehouse that there may be food in his house. So it was the revealed will of God that his people *tithe*.

Just to pause on this point briefly, the Catholic Church lays down as a precept of the Church that the faithful are obliged to support adequately their pastors and the work of the Church. I have also read that Billy Graham, in a sermon entitled "Partners with God," said the following. *"One of the greatest sins in America today is the fact that we are robbing God of that which rightfully belongs to Him. When we don't tithe, we shirk a just debt. Actually we are not giving when we give God one-tenth, for it belongs to Him already. This is a debt we owe. Not until we have given a tenth do we actually begin making an offering to the Lord!"* So our Lord, in our Gospel today, was explicitly

reaffirming the Old Testament obligation to tithe – but he did not want the “important matters of the law” to be missed through culpable and sinful blindness. This is the point to be observed and taken to heart. One must understand what above all God had revealed of himself and of how we ought live in his sight. The revealed details of religious living *enabled* the living out of the truly important things. In this sense, tithing (for instance) *enabled* the fulfilment of the “*important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness.*” Tithing was a divinely-ordained means of living those features of revealed religion that were based on the very nature of God as he had revealed himself: “*justice, mercy and faithfulness*”. God was just, merciful and faithful, and his chosen people were to live in justice, mercy and faithfulness. Their hearts were to be like the heart of God: just, merciful and faithful. The practical details set forth in the Torah and developed by the prophets were meant to nourish these fundamental virtues of a lived religion. They were never meant to replace them or obscure them in such a way that the focus gradually became the practitioner of religion rather than God. Some or even many of the

teachers of the law and of the Pharisees had thus become blind (to God and his will). What they focused on was *themselves* and their tithing. *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.* The “cup and dish” is the teacher of the law and the Pharisee – outside it is clean, inside it is filthy. Our Lord was clear: *First clean the inside of the cup and dish.* Then all will be well.

The revealed religion of Moses intended a worship by the heart and a moral life pleasing to a holy God. Our Lord’s words clarify in the plainest manner the nobility of Mosaic religion and that he himself came to fulfil it in a wondrous manner. *This is the will of God*, St Paul writes, *your sanctification*. If there is one thing which is truly notable about the revealed religion of the Old Testament it is this: Apart from its doctrine of but one holy God, there is *sin*. Sin is real and it exists in man. It is a terrible offence against God, ever to be atoned for and from which man had to be liberated. Christ reaffirmed all of this, revealing

far more and accomplishing the extraordinary work of atoning for the sin of the world. He redeemed the human race from sin, rose to a new life which he thenceforth offered to man through his body the Church. Let us marvel at the all-powerful mercy of God!

A Second Reflection: (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3.14-17)

Scripture Alone The bedrock reality on which we as Christians base our lives is the call of God addressed to each of us. If we live according to that call to live in Christ we shall share in the glory of Christ. As St Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2: 1-3, "*Through the Good News that we brought God called you so that you should share the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" But St Paul gives a directive that we should note well. The classical Protestant position is that we receive the Gospel and the Revelation it contains by "Scripture alone". So widespread is this idea in Christian society that even many Catholics feel it necessary to find the whole support for any Christian doctrine in Scripture alone. It is an assumption that has spread in people's minds. But St Paul, in the sentence that follows on the one just quoted,

says to his readers (the Thessalonians) to "*stand firm, then, brothers, and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*" So they were being instructed by the inspired author himself to be faithful to what they had been *told* by means of two channels: yes, by his (inspired) letter, but also what he had taught them *by word of mouth*. They were to "*keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.*" The Church, as acting in and represented by Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, handed on the Gospel, not only by Scripture but by "word of mouth" too.

The Gospel comes to us in both Scripture and the Church's Tradition. Let us then renew our appreciation of the priceless means whereby the Gospel which takes us to glory comes to us: the Scriptures and the teaching Church, both being creations of the Holy Spirit.



Wednesday of the Twenty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10.16-18; Psalm 127;

Matthew 23:27-32

Jesus said, Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as

righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! (Matthew 23: 27-32)

Moral Life The nature and objectivity of morality is a fundamental philosophical issue. One modern philosopher has stated that David Hume was the sharpest mind in British Philosophy, and that therefore Theism had to engage with Hume in order to get a hearing. Hume's main ethical writings are to be found in *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-40), *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), parts of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), and in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779). Hume's ethical thought is part of his attempt to explain all of human nature in terms of

natural causes and events, including how we make moral judgments and why we have religious beliefs. For Hume, everything about us is open to empirical investigation and to explanation in naturalistic terms. Hume often compares humans with other animals, tracing the bases of human morality to features we share with them. For instance, moral judgments are essentially functions of sentiment. Traits that elicit our approval are those that are useful or agreeable to oneself or others. Our ends depend on what we desire, which depends on what we feel (with respect to pleasure and pain). Morality is thus based on sentiment and passion – and by positing such a system he excludes, of course, God as a moral assessor. The long and the short of it is that the physical and empirically verifiable world is all that there is. That is his assumption and his conclusion. Hume's writings were an important engine in the advance of the secular view in which God, sin, and one's inner moral state are but shadows. But Hume, of course, is wrong. We *clearly perceive* that there is a moral law that cannot be reduced to how we feel, to sensations and passions. We are conscious by moral *perception* that we are morally corrupt as the case may be. Indeed, in

our clear moments we can see that the moral law and our inner moral condition is far more real than the rocks and trees we see before us. Hume thought that the only hard facts were facts that *felt* hard.

But this is wrong. Sin is a hard objective fact – and anyhow, within the normal and healthy conscience, sin will be *felt* to be very hard. We can shut our eyes to the mountains, the valleys and to the physical things about us, but we cannot shut our eyes to manifest duty and the moral collapse and degradation following on its neglect. The worst character in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was Lady Macbeth. She was a veritable Herodias who was the architect of John the Baptist's execution. Her heart was hard as flint, but she could not escape the tightening grip of her own fearsome conscience. Sleep-walking, she plaintively cried, "*Out, damned spot! Out, I say!*" (5.1) trying, in her sleep, to wash her hands clean of the blood of King Duncan. Morality and the inner moral state of man is the most real thing in the world. Sanctity soars above the mountains in its hard reality and in its significance for the world. The most important thing in life is not to

feel and gain coins but to be good and holy. I say all this to introduce our Lord's words directed to "*the teachers of the law and the Pharisees*" in our Gospel today (Matthew 23:27-32). Our Lord exulted in the beauty of the lilies of the field, but he exulted far more in moral goodness. Conversely, he powerfully lambasted deliberate sin and spiritual corruption. These were the principal realities in the world, and David Hume – subtle and influential philosopher though he was – had it all wrong. "*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.*" Those teachers of the law and Pharisees to whom our Lord spoke were "*whitewashed tombs,*" and "*inside*" were full of "*everything unclean.*" They were dead within – "*full of dead men's bones.*" "*Woe to you!*" our Lord solemnly warned them. The tragedy of our age is that, characteristically, we have lost the sense of sin and have reduced sin to something like a mere subjective state or feeling.

What we can see and touch is only part of what there is. In actual fact, what we cannot see and touch with our senses is much more real. Pre-eminent among the unseen realities of life is man's moral and spiritual condition. As we think of Christ's condemnation of the unseen state of heart of the scribes and Pharisees, let us also think of those whom he highly praised. At his first meeting with Nathanael, he accorded to him the highest praise. He was a true Israelite, *one in whom there was no guile*. Let us make goodness and holiness of heart our quest. This is the true and solid foundation of everything, and it will take us to heaven.

A Second Reflection: (2 Thessalonians 3:6-10.16-18)

Being like God by means of our Work In his second letter to the Thessalonians (ch.3: 6-10.16-18) St Paul refers to *work* – he is severe in his strictures concerning the one who refuses to work. They are to "*keep away from any of the brothers who refuses to work or to live according to the tradition we passed on to you.*" They are to imitate Paul and his companions, who never ceased to work. The first pages of

the Bible portray God at work, at the work of creation. His work is set in a framework the devout reader will easily understand. God's work is presented as being a working week, as it were, for he is shown as completing the work of creation in six days and then resting on the seventh. All could understand this, that God really does work, and that our daily work, set within the normal working day week with the sabbath rest at the end of it, makes us like unto him. It is therefore unlike God not to be willing to work. On one occasion when our Lord was criticized for doing what the leaders of the Jews said was not permitted on the Sabbath, he replied that his Father was working, so he would too.

It is in our work that we fulfill the duties and responsibilities that God in his providence has given us to fulfill. So we should work with all our heart, doing all for the glory of God. In this way through our work we are sanctified, we sanctify our work itself and make it a worthy offering to God, and by means of it we sanctify others — those for whom we are working. Let us be like God then, by filling up our

lives with the work he has given us to do, no matter how ordinary it may appear. Therein lies the grandeur of the ordinary working life.

Thursday of the Twenty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Psalm 144;
Matthew 24:42-59

Jesus said to his disciples: "Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come. Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come. "Who, then, is the faithful and prudent servant, whom the master has put in charge of his household to distribute to them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master on his arrival finds doing so. Amen, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property. But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is long delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eat and drink with drunkards, the servant's master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth." (Matthew 24:42-59)

Stand Ready One of the most startling things that recurs constantly in history is the sudden end of many human lives. Alexander the Great

rose like a great meteor across the sky, imposed himself remorselessly on the attention of all, and then suddenly faded and disappeared. In the prime of young and victorious manhood, "*having advanced to the ends of the earth*".. (which) .. "*fell silent before him,*" his "*heart became proud and arrogant*" (1 Maccabees 1:1-8). Then he suddenly fell sick and died. No-one knew that his end would be so sudden. His own father, Philip (possibly greater than Alexander), had his own life suddenly cut short by assassination. Julius Caesar, conqueror of Gaul and later of Pompey, entered Rome victorious and became the first of the emperors. But suddenly he was assassinated – and by personal acquaintances! These famous classical figures are but emblems of a pattern that embraces great and small. A couple marry and move on to their farming property, raising a large family. The marriage is a good one but suddenly the husband collapses with a massive heart attack and dies. His wife and children are left bereft. Death has come without warning. Death is the mystery of life, and it is the most natural thing in the world to wonder *why* a living thing has to die. There is nothing untoward about the idea of a living thing passing from one stage of life

to another, but the mystery is that life comes to its end in death. Man has generally surmised that with death there begins an Afterlife, but death retains its terrible sting. What is awful about death is its unpredictability. Two priests set out on a long drive north of Sydney, and they stop for ten minutes to pick up a third. Later that morning all three are killed in a collision on the roads. If they had not stopped to pick up the third, the catastrophe would not have happened because of the several minutes of difference it would have made to the course of events. No-one in the world expected that their deaths were nigh, and about to fall. As the famous Australian bushranger, Ned Kelly, reportedly said on the gallows, "*such is life!*" Now, the point is that if life is like this, it would seem to be a matter of ordinary common sense that we so live as always to be prepared.

Christ lays down as imperative that we be prepared for a sudden death. He, the Author of life and the world, is warning us. It would therefore seem that normally we cannot expect that God will change life's natural course to suit our preferences. That is to say, we cannot

expect time to get ready for death – time to prepare may be our lot, but it may not be. It is therefore a matter of ordinary prudence that we always be prepared, and our Lord gives a parallel from ordinary life. When we leave our home to go shopping, or get out of our car to enter a building, we lock the door behind us in case a thief is about. So too, we remain prepared for a sudden coming of the Son of Man. *"Jesus said to his disciples: 'Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come. Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come'."* Our Lord is even more explicit as to what this means. Being always prepared means always striving to fulfil our God-given responsibilities. It means being ever "on the job" of doing the will of God with as pure a love for him as is possible. It means making sure we are not distracted away from what God expects of us, and indulging in our own preferences, fancies and self-seeking. A person who has lived a good life, but then at a certain point dallies with

what is not pleasing to God, and then with what is most offensive to him, is on a serious knife-edge. How tragic if at this precise point he is called before the Judgement Seat! *"Who, then, is the faithful and prudent servant, whom the master has put in charge of his household to distribute to them their food at the proper time?... But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is long delayed,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eat and drink with drunkards, the servant's master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth"* (Matthew 24:42-59).

Let us resolve so to live that we are always prepared. Crack troops are always prepared and are not caught napping. Let us spend each day in such a way that were it to be our last, we would be ready. Let us so pray that we are always ready. Let us so do our work that we are always ready – joyful, trusting, pure in intention and single-minded of heart. Our business in life is to do God's will, and this

life is the test of our readiness to do this. As our Lord says, "*Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come.*"

A Second Reflection: (1 Corinthians 1: 1-9; Matthew 24:42-51)

Be always at our "Employment" There are many facets of the basic attitudes of being a Christian. One is that of being ever in a state of expectation. The Christian is someone who is waiting, awaiting the coming of Jesus, and day by day he lives accordingly. St Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (ch.1: 1-9) refers to the Corinthian Christians "*waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.*" Our Lord says in today's Gospel that his disciples are to "*stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming*" (Matthew 24: 42). They "*must stand ready because the Son of man is*

coming at an hour you do not expect.” Our Lord explains that this means being constantly at the employment given by the master: *"Happy that servant if his master's arrival finds him at this employment."* We must use the time of life to do as good a job as possible with the responsibilities which God in his providence has entrusted to us. Our whole life is to be shaped by this awareness that Jesus is coming. We must be ready.

The philosopher Heidegger's most famous book was *Being and Time*. Our being is essentially caught up in time and this time is always passing, never to be recovered. Let us use all the time given to us by God to be at our God given employment so as to be able to stand ready at the coming of Christ, be this coming in daily moments of grace, be it at our death, or be it at the end of time.



Friday of the Twenty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 1:17-25; Psalm 32; Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus told his disciples this parable: "The Kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones, when taking their lamps, brought no oil with them, but the wise brought flasks of oil with their lamps. Since the bridegroom was long

delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight, there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise ones replied, 'No, for there may not be enough for us and you. Go instead to the merchants and buy some for yourselves.' While they went off to buy it, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went into the wedding feast with him. Then the door was locked. Afterwards the other virgins came and said, 'Lord, Lord, open the door for us!' But he said in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.' Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.' ” (Matthew 25:1-13)

Stay Awake!

John Henry Newman was nineteenth century England's foremost apologist of the religion of revealed dogma. He was a master of English prose, and his writings spanned various genres – sermons, theological and philosophical investigation, history, educational theory, autobiography, poetry and novels, and an abundance of correspondence. He wrote two novels, and each is concerned with

religious belief. The second of the two, *Callista*, was published in 1855. It has for its heroine the young woman Callista, a pagan and quintessential Greek. In her encounter with St Cyprian (ch.19), she objects to the Christian dogma of Hell. The maxims of Christianity are beautiful, indeed too beautiful to be believed, she said to him. But *"its dogmas are too dismal, too shocking, too odious to be believed. They revolt me."* *"Such as what?"* asked St Cyprian (Caecilius). *"Such as this,"* answered Callista. *"Nothing will ever make me believe that all my people have gone and will go to an eternal Tartarus."* (The classical "Tartarus" was something vaguely like Hell.) Cyprian (Caecilius) proceeded to demonstrate the rationality of an eternal Tartarus – without specifying any particular persons, such as her own people, who would go there. At the end of his account, Callista said, *"I cannot answer you, sir, but I do not believe the dogma on that account a whit the more. My mind revolts from the notion. There must be some way out of it."* This imagined dialogue between the educated and persecuted Bishop of Carthage and a pagan Greek woman (who later becomes a Christian and dies a martyr), indicates the natural human presentiment

that there is a good God who loves, a God who has instituted a just order of things. Such an intimation revolts at the thought of an eternal Hell. Such is the expectation of fallen nature which profoundly underestimates the enormity of sin and separation from God. The pagan Callista revolted from the "dogma" of Hell, but forgot that this "dismal" dogma was answered by other dogmas of great joy, those of the Incarnation and the Redemption.

This tension between the almighty and saving love of God and the stern fact of a judgment appears often in our Lord's teaching, and our Gospel today (Matthew 25:1-13) is one such instance. The kingdom of heaven – God's rule and lordship – is likened to a wedding banquet, and the bridegroom is coming. God's rule is, then, a wondrous relationship of spousal love between the Lord and his own people. He is the Bridegroom who is coming, and all must be vigilant for his arrival. This image of the divine Bridegroom is deeply etched in the writings of the prophets, and I suspect it is an overtone of the very name of "Yahweh." Yahweh is the one *who is*, and who will *be with* his

people. *As who I am, I shall be with you.* It is not a long step from this to the prophetic image of the Bridegroom. But all through the Scriptures there is the threat of the people being cast out if they are incorrigibly unfaithful. Even so, God will be faithful. So at the outset, while the joy of the wedding is constantly before us, there is the terrible possibility of being excluded. God is the Bridegroom, and he is present in the Person of Jesus Christ. There is so much to anticipate with joy, and this is captured in the image of the ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the Bridegroom. But this is not mere magic. It is a moral matter involving a personal responsibility to take great care to be ready for the Bridegroom's arrival. So it is that among the ten virgins there were several who took no care. They were unprepared, presumably because they dissipated their time and thoughts on other things of their preference. They did not keep their thoughts on the Bridegroom, his interests and his arrival. They knew his arrival could be at any point, but basically they did not care. So they were caught unprepared, and returned with the gates now locked. The terrible fact is that once the gates are locked they will not be opened

again. As we read, *"Then the door was locked. Afterwards the other virgins came and said, 'Lord, Lord, open the door for us!' But he said in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.' Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour."*

No other prophet before Jesus Christ spoke so much of the Last Things: the possibility of a sudden end, the divine judgment, and then either Heaven or Hell. God is love, as St John writes in his inspired Letter. He is the Bridegroom of the Church, and the Bridegroom of our souls. At the same time he is our Judge. These things the heart of man intimates, but revelation shows the greatness of the divine love and the enormity of sin. Let us then take our stand with Jesus Christ; guarding against all the enemies that can suddenly fall upon us and take us captive.

A Second Reflection: (1 Corinthians 1: 17-25)

Christ Crucified, the Wisdom of God There have been various schemes developed by great minds – philosophers, architects, governors – for the improvement of mankind. How many, though, have identified the fundamental *problem* in human society and in man? God has revealed it as being *sin*, both the original sin and the ongoing sins of mankind. Apart from identifying the problem, how many have come up with a *solution*? God has not only revealed what the problem is. He has solved the problem, providing us with the solution that each person is free to make his own, and apply to his life. The solution was the crucifixion of his son, Jesus Christ. That would sound madness to a pagan and foolish to the religious. But this is, as St Paul says, "*the power and the wisdom of God.*"

We make this solution our own by following in the footsteps of Christ crucified, turning our sufferings into a means of redemption and sanctification, by accepting them in obedience to the will of God.

Saturday of the Twenty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Psalm 33:12-13, 18-21;

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus told his disciples this parable: A man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who

had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the

ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (Matthew 25:14-30)

Our Work Joseph Butler (1692-1752) was an Anglican bishop, and an important philosopher engaged in the defence of the Christian religion. He was born in Wantage in the English county of Berkshire (now Oxfordshire). He is known for his attack on Hobbes's egoist philosophy and Locke's theory of personal identity, and for his influence on many philosophers, including David Hume, Thomas Reid, and Adam Smith. He is most famous for his *Fifteen Sermons Preached*

at the Rolls Chapel (1726) and his *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* (1736). The *Analogy* is an important work of Christian apologetics in the history of the controversies over the deism that was dominant in his century. In his defence of revealed religion he concentrated on "*the general analogy between the principles of divine government, as set forth by the biblical revelation, and those observable in the course of nature, [an analogy which] leads us to the warrantable conclusion that there is one Author of both.*" That is to say, he saw a strong similarity between the pattern of divine government at work in biblical revelation and that which can be seen in the course of nature. This similarity suggested, he argued, that if we allow that the course of nature points to a divine Author and Designer (which the deists maintained), then the biblical revelation points to the same divine Author (because it manifests the same kind of government). It was the divine authorship of biblical revelation, of course, which the deists rejected. I only mention the writings of Butler to introduce the idea of *an analogy* between God's ways in the order of nature and his ways in the order of revealed religion. Now, by his numerous parables and

illustrations from everyday life, our Lord suggests a likeness between what is expected of man in everyday life, and what God expects of us in revealed religion. For instance, there is the fundamental matter of human work. All grant that work is central to life. That is to say, work that builds up the good things of life is absolutely commended by man and society. In similar fashion, our Lord's teaching shows that God himself commends a life of enterprising work on all the good things contained in his supernatural revelation in Christ.

In our Gospel today (Matthew 25:14-30) our Lord tells his story of the *"man going on a journey"* who *"called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey."* This is a perfectly familiar scene from ordinary life. A person entrusts his assets to certain qualified people and expects them to build up his property. He gives different amounts to different persons, but of course he expects all of them to apply their best energies to the flourishing of his business. So he leaves

it to them, and at a later date he approaches them to see how much his interests have been forwarded. All of this is a common feature of modern life – and it seems to have been a feature of the life and times of our Lord. But in our Lord's story, it transpires that one of the agents did nothing with his charge. He made no attempt to build on the capital, but contented himself merely with not losing it. He did not even put it into the bank so as at least to gain a basic bank interest and retain its value. He simply buried it away – in modern terms, in his own safe. So it depreciated, which is to say that the property declined in value. Who would commend this lack of action? In altogether exceptional circumstances of an international freefall in all currencies, exceptional caution and a purely holding action may be understandable. But the total lack of enterprise in this case was culpable. The point is, that all know that we must work at building up the good things of the natural order in life. All know this, and so it is entirely understandable that God too will expect this of us in the good things he has revealed supernaturally. In the first instance, those things are all that is contained in the business of faith in Jesus Christ. This is the work of

God, our Lord said, that you believe in the one he has sent (John 6: 29). Our greatest work in life is that we grow in our faith, and on that basis that we grow in our hope in God and in our love for Jesus Christ our Redeemer and our God. The saint is the truly enterprising one in this work. The mediocre person is a lazy person, in God's sight.

Let us all get cracking, then. We all have a great work to do, and that pressing work is our own sanctification, and the sanctification of others. *This is the will of God*, St Paul writes, *your sanctification*. The toughest work of all is that to which we are all called: to become hidden saints, with hearts like that of Jesus Christ. We must so labour that the love of God flourishes and triumphs over all in our heart. As one modern saint writes, "*You will become a saint if you have charity, if you manage to do the things which please others and do not offend God, though you find them hard to do*" (Escriva, *The Forge*, 556). Let us to the work, then! Ah! Now I begin!

A Second Reflection: (Matthew 25:1-13)

The Servant Who Received But One Talent Let us notice a detail in the words of St Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor.1: 26-31), and in particular how he describes their status. "*How many of you were wise in the ordinary sense of the word, how many were influential people, or came from noble families?*" That is to say, they were very ordinary people (but called to a divine and marvellous vocation). In another letter, his first to the Thessalonians (ch.4: 9-11), he instructs the Thessalonians to make a point of living quietly, attending to their own business and earning their living (all the while making greater and greater progress in love). He expected them to live what other people would call *ordinary* lives. It reminds us of the hidden greatness of the ordinary life. Let us but think of the Holy Family all those years at Nazareth. Think of our Lady and St Joseph. They were seemingly very ordinary people immersed in a very ordinary life, yet year after year they made tremendous progress in the life of grace. Their lives were

filled with the perfect fulfilment of the very ordinary round of duties God had given them. Let us now think of our Lord's parable of the talents, and in particular of the servant entrusted with just the one talent (Matthew 25: 1-13). We could call that servant with the one talent an ordinary person living an ordinary life. He did not put his talent to use for his master's interests and was condemned accordingly.

So then, whatever be our talents and opportunities, however modest they may be or seem to us and to others, we must work wholeheartedly with them for the Master. Therein lies the grandeur of the ordinary life.



Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85): 3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord,
for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving,
full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the
love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you
may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe
what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 3:19 21.30 31; Psalm 67;
 Hebrews 12:18 19.22 24; Luke 14:1.7 14

*On a Sabbath Jesus went to dine at the home of one of the leading
Pharisees, and the people there were observing him carefully. He told
a parable to those who had been invited, noticing how they were
choosing the places of honour at the table. "When you are invited by*

someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline at table in the place of honour. A more distinguished guest than you may have been invited by him, and the host who invited both of you may approach you and say, 'Give your place to this man,' and then you would proceed with embarrassment to take the lowest place. Rather, when you are invited, go and take the lowest place so that when the host comes to you he may say, 'My friend, move up to a higher position.' Then you will enjoy the esteem of your companions at the table. For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." Then he said to the host who invited him, "When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbours, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14:1, 7-14)

Humility An act of humility can be a good worldly tactic. That is to say, it can be a calculated and successful means of gaining the praise and esteem of others. A show of humility may be the best way to gain acceptance after a serious mistake or moral failure. It can also be a good strategy after, say, an election victory. But this worldly-wise humility in *demeanour* need have nothing to do with humility of heart, for *expressions* of humility in the world can spring from nothing other than political or social savvy. In today's Gospel our Lord speaks of humility not in terms of immediate temporal advantage, but in ultimate terms. "*Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted*" (Luke 14:1.7-14). To understand the specifically Christian virtue of humility, we must read the Gospels and contemplate the heart of Jesus Christ. This is exactly what our Lord invites us to do: "*Come to me, all you that labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart.*" Further, humility is a fundamental feature of the heavenly Father, for at the Last Supper Christ said, "*he who sees me sees the Father.*" Therefore, just as Christ

is meek and humble, so is the Father. Everything we see the Son doing in the Gospels that manifests the humility of his heart, reveals also the humility of the Father. So then, humility reigns in the highest heavens, in the very heart of God. It therefore also pertains to the Spirit of God. It is the Holy Spirit's wonderful gift. If we think of this divine virtue, this virtue reigning at the heart of the Godhead, we shall esteem Christ-like humility and strive to grow in it. We grow in it by humbling ourselves, rather than by exalting ourselves. By contrast, while humility reigns in heaven, pride reigns in Hell. The first sin that was ever committed was a sin of pride, and it was committed by one of the most illustrious of the angels – Lucifer, the bearer of light. He became the prince of darkness and the father of lies. He exalted himself and so was humbled.

The book of Genesis tells us that God created our first parents and placed them in the Garden of Eden. Leaving them to enjoy its fruits, he commanded them to respect the divine law of good and evil. They were not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and

evil. But then another personality entered the scene, Satan. He intervened with his insinuating temptation to attempt to rival God. "No," he said, "if you eat this forbidden fruit, *you will be like God.*" Eve liked the thought of it, took the evil plunge, and enticed Adam to do the same. So Lucifer, full of self-exaltation himself, enticed our first parents to exalt themselves in like manner before God. *Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled*, our Lord tells us in the Gospel. Before the world began, pride took root among the highest angels and wrought havoc. They were cast out into hell. At the dawn of human history, pride took root in our first parents and wrought havoc among them and among all of mankind. They were cast out of the Garden in which they had been placed. A Redeemer from heaven, God's own Son, would have to come in order to restore the situation. We ought look on pride, or the effort to exalt ourselves before others, as ridiculous and ruinous. I remember when I was growing up we had a dog, and every bone we gave the dog, the dog would bury. And it knew exactly where all its bones were. One day a sister of mine brought another dog into our home for a while, and what

did our dog do? Just to assert its superiority, it went and dug up all his bones, put them together in a big heap in one corner of the backyard and stood over them, watching the new dog that had just arrived. The new dog, all frustrated at the sight, could only bark back from a distance. Our dog just watched, very satisfied at being superior to the other dog because it had all those bones. It was funny and ridiculous, but how like human beings our dog was! How often we want to be, and try to be, and succeed in being, the top dog before others!

As St Paul writes, *let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*. Though he was God himself, St Paul continues, Christ did not look on equality with God as something to hang on to, but rather he humbled himself and took the form of a slave, and even went humbler still, to death on a cross. And so God raised him up on high and placed him at his own right hand. Our Lord himself is the great example of what he means when he says that the one who humbles himself will be exalted. So let us study the example of our Lord. Each day let us spend a few minutes with a Gospel passage, putting ourselves in the scene and

observing our Lord prayerfully. Let us learn from him, especially from his humility, his shunning of all self-exaltation, for "*everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted.*"

A Second Reflection: (Luke 14:1, 7-14)

Love for the Poor If we are earnest about following our Lord closely, there will be some things we are instinctively drawn to work on in our life. It could be extra time in prayer, which is wonderful. It could be extra time given to the apostolate, which is wonderful. It could be extra efforts in the religious and spiritual education of our children, which is wonderful. But there will be many things that we will tend to neglect. Time will be needed for us to see what these things are. We must be open to that development in ourselves and committed to the full will of God, if we want truly to advance to a close union with and likeness to Christ. We shall have to take the means to become more aware of what needs to be done in our life, and hence there will

have to be regular spiritual reading, listening carefully to the homilies at Mass, taking regular spiritual direction, and so forth.

Now, one thing we must do and which may be lacking in us is to develop a Christ-like love for the poor. God loves the poor, the suffering, the outcast, the one who is deprived in some way, and he is rich in mercy. If we aspire to be his children, we must learn to love the poor too, and to be merciful to those in need. God will show his mercy to the poor precisely through us. Our Lord in the Gospel today (Luke 14:1.7-14) says to the Pharisee who had invited him to the meal, "*When you have a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; that they cannot pay you back means that you are fortunate, because repayment will be made to you when the virtuous rise again.*" Our Lord was making a general point. We must learn to love the poor, the needy, the helpless, and do what we can to help them. Indeed, in our Lord's description of the General Judgment, which we find in chapter 25 of St Matthew, he says that we will be judged on how we have helped those

in need, because what we do to the least, he will regard as having been done to himself. We will be rewarded or punished accordingly.

We ought ask ourselves, do I have much love for the poor as yet? Have I begun to grow in this aspect of the imitation of Christ? If we in our hearts have to admit that we do not love the poor very much nor help them much, then we must admit to that in the presence of God, and ask for the grace to start working on it by taking some attainable and concrete steps in that direction. Let us pray for the grace to make a real beginning in putting on the mind of Christ our Lord in this aspect of our Christian life. The saints loved the poor. So must we, if we wish to be like Christ.



Monday of the Twenty-second Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Psalm 118; Luke 4:16-30

Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the

poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They also asked, "Is this not the son of Joseph?" He said to them, "Surely you will quote me this proverb, 'Physician, cure yourself,' and say, 'Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.'" And he said, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place. Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land. It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were

all filled with fury. They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong. But he passed through the midst of them and went away. (Luke 4:16-30)

Nazareth Our Gospel scene today has a certain uniqueness in that there is no other instance recorded in the Gospels when a synagogue congregation, obviously consisting of the substance of the village population, rose up in anger and drove our Lord out of a synagogue for a lynching. There is recorded in the Gospel of St John occasions when our Lord, in the presence of the religious leaders, claimed that God was his own Father, that he and the Father were one, and that the divine name was his – "*before Abraham ever was, I am.*" The leaders took up stones to stone him, but he escaped. As a matter of fact, Christ effortlessly escaped whenever he wished. Now, to return to today's passage from St Luke, it is to be noticed that on this occasion (at Nazareth) Christ does not claim divinity. He clearly alludes to his being the *Messiah* by applying to himself the prophecy of Isaiah. But

how are we to account for the singular violence of his own townsmen? The narration in the Gospel is clear. There was an upsurge of powerful village violence against him. There was no trial by competent authorities. Jesus was grabbed and hustled out, shoved and pushed to a local precipice. The design was to kill him. When Christ was arrested by the Temple authorities in the Garden of Gethsemane and then tried before the Sanhedrin, they had no power to put him to death. This required the sanction of the Roman procurator, which through loud pressure and threats they obtained. But they had to obtain it. Here at Nazareth we are speaking of a tiny backwater village of which perhaps few outsiders received much news. They were about to kill one of their own sons. It has to be regarded as a sensation, and doubtlessly that is one reason why it found a place in the Gospels. The whole amazing event, this terrible storm in this tiny tea-cup, suggests that our Lord led a most ordinary life during his thirty years at Nazareth. They were amazed at him when he spoke: *Where did he get all this*, they asked? It may suggest that Christ had rarely if ever spoken publicly at Nazareth before. It may suggest that till the commencement

of his public ministry he had never done anything that drew notable attention to himself. But on the occasion of his return from his public ministry, he did.

In his Gospel, St John tells us of the first miracle worked by Jesus Christ – it was at the instigation of his mother, and it was at the wedding feast of Cana. Significantly, John tells us that on that occasion Jesus let his glory be seen, suggesting that little his glory was seen publicly prior to this. Christ's lot over the years of his childhood, youth, and early manhood at Nazareth had been a hidden one. He shared this situation with Mary and Joseph his foster-father. It was the hidden, ordinary and obscure situation of countless human beings. Now, though, he was back and had brought with him a reputation of prophetic ministry elsewhere in Galilee. When during his synagogue address at Nazareth – or perhaps during his addresses over a few Sabbaths – Christ warned his townsmen about their lack of faith, everything became ominously sour. The townspeople, perhaps influenced by some leaders, became suddenly angry at their long-standing childhood, adolescent and

early adult companion. Doubtless Satan was busy exploiting the changing atmosphere. At the Last Supper we read that Satan entered Judas, who went out into the night to arrange our Lord's betrayal. We also gain the impression from the number of exorcisms that featured in our Lord's public ministry that Satan and the demons were especially present and active at his time. Could we not see in this upsurge of lethal hostility a sequence of events in which *Satan* was busy too, and in some sense entering the hearts of those leading the fray? All of these things show forth the thoroughly authentic character of the Incarnation, in which God truly became man. The infinite God, while remaining himself, took on a limited nature and so exposed himself to the merciless pounding of sin and of ordinary events. This happened precisely when he began to reveal his glory. He gained disciples, and he gained enemies. When Christ warned his disciples that he came to bring not peace but division, he had experienced this first-hand in his own tiny village. Our Gospel scene reminds us of the havoc of fallen human nature.

It also reminds us of the grandeur of Jesus Christ. He calmly, clearly and impressively bears witness to the truth of his Person before his own townsmen. Moreover, during the attempt at his murder, we have a portent of Christ's invincible power. The people drove him to the brow of the hill of their town, but he *passed through their midst* and went on. We are not given a description of this striking event, so calm, so deft, so masterful. It does indicate, though, that Christ was lord of the events, and nothing could dominate him beyond what *he* allowed. So it would be in his public life, till his hour came. Jesus Christ is Lord. Man as he is, he is Lord of lords and King of kings.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 4:16-30)

God loves the poor in spirit Let us notice a detail in the prophecy of Isaiah that our Lord explicitly refers to in telling his own townsmen of his mission (Luke 4: 16-30). The prophet Isaiah, in speaking of the coming Messiah, says of him that he is sent "*to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind new sight.*" God looks with special compassion on the unfortunate, and his

blessings (especially the blessing brought by the Messiah) are especially intended for them, the *poor*. Now, *we are all poor*, needy, captive and blind. But for a variety of reasons (such as the feeling that we do not need it) we can reject what God offers. We see this in evidence in this very passage from Luke. Our Lord's townspeople rejected him, after our Lord referred to examples in the Scriptures during the times of Elijah and Elisha, where the poor and the needy were not judged to be worthy.

Let us ask God for the grace to be like him in his love for the poor, while being poor in spirit ourselves. Let us humbly recognise our profound need for all he offers.



Tuesday of the Twenty-second Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 2:10-16; Psalm 144; Luke 4:31-37

Then Jesus went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority. In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you

come to destroy us? I know who you are- the Holy One of God! Be quiet! Jesus said sternly. Come out of him! Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him. All the people were amazed and said to each other, What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out! And the news about him spread throughout the surrounding area. (Luke 4:31-37)

Christ and Satan

One of the sensational scenes in John Henry Newman's novel, *Callista*, is that of the sudden possession of Juba by a demon (ch.23). Newman depicts the demon as having assumed the form of a strange, crawling animal at the beck and call of Gurta the witch. Juba, haughty against God and against the devil, yet often tinkering with the demons and the occult, had just insulted Gurta. With a whistle she summoned the uncouth animal to her. Taking it into her arms she suddenly flung it at Juba. Struck by the animal, Juba was hit by a shock, and within minutes the demonic possession began to prevail. Newman proceeds with a gripping account of the loss of mind,

of will and of all that allowed Juba to have command of himself – Satan took over. God had judged Juba’s sinful defiance of him, and a demon was allowed to do its terrible work. In the last chapter of the novel (ch.35) the possessed Juba is brought struggling violently into the presence of the martyred body of St Callista. St Cyprian is nearby, the celebrant of the Eucharist. Juba is made to touch her feet with his hands, and with a shriek he is delivered of the demon. As Newman puts it, *"the evil spirit had gone out; but he was an idiot."* It was the first of the miracles that followed the martyrdom of Callista. Juba attached himself to the church, and though he could be taught very little, he was not troublesome. At the end of ten years in this condition he suddenly went to the bishop and asked for baptism, saying that Callista had restored his mind. It was so, and he was baptized. The next morning he was found at the tomb of Callista, dead. Why do I mention this? I mention it only to introduce the powerful and devastating effect of the entry of Satan into a person. The great Newman had no doubt about such matters. In the fictional Juba's case, this Satanic entry followed deliberate pride against God, man and against Satan too. Yet he

tinkered with Satan himself. It was a real case of Satanic entry – and we have a Satanic entry into Judas, one of the chosen Twelve, no less. St John tells us that during Last Supper itself Satan entered Judas. Then he went out into the night. He had descended into the darkness, and its final result was his own hanging of himself. Our Lord said that the Devil was a liar and a murderer from the beginning.

In our Gospel passage today our Lord enters the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach – as was his custom, it seems, during his public ministry. One of the notable features of the general situation during our Lord's public ministry, as described in the Gospels, is the frequent case of demon possession. There is nothing of this described in the Old Testament books. Indeed, the devil is rarely mentioned there at all, let alone his possession by many in the general population. But in the Gospels Satan figures frequently, and makes his appearance immediately on John the Baptist's public identification of Christ as the Messiah. We read that Christ then went into the wilderness and was tempted by the Devil. In our passage today Christ taught in the

synagogue with authority and dramatic effect, and the congregation was profoundly moved. It seems to have been too much for the demon which, to that point, had been quietly in possession of a man in the synagogue. It bellowed out at our Lord, obviously in agony at the spectacle and presence of this Man of the ages. *"He cried out at the top of his voice, Ha! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are- the Holy One of God!"* It was helpless before him, and its proud helplessness drove it to reveal its presence among the people. We have no indication of whether – as in the fictional case of Juba, and in the factual case of Judas – the unfortunate man was just hapless or indeed culpable in being possessed. On one occasion Christ exorcised a *boy* – so we must presume that demon-possession was not always due to sin and dallying with Satan. But whatever be the circumstances, it is evident that Satan did evil to the person over whom he had some control. Now, in this case, what do we see? At a mere word from Christ, Satan is sent packing from the man in the synagogue. Moreover, we are told explicitly that the man was left unharmed. *"Be quiet! Jesus said*

sternly. Come out of him! Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him" (Luke 4:31-37). It shows the power, the goodness and the beauty of Christ before the evil one.

One of the discoveries of modern science is that the universe is very, very vast. The human race is vast. The natural world is vast. But we learn from revelation that the unseen is much more vast. Consider the countless generations of souls that have passed on from this life and are in one of three states: heaven, purgatory, or – horrible thought! – hell. Consider the numerous angelic spirits who serve God and who have been and are Angels Guardian of countless human beings now and in the past. Consider the great and canonized saints now in heaven. Consider the great God, Father, Son and Spirit. Consider the baleful demonic world. Let us make our choice. Our choice must be for God – now, today and forever!



Wednesday of the Twenty-second Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord,
for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving,
full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the
love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you
may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe
what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Psalm 32; Luke 4:38 44

*Jesus left the synagogue and went to the home of Simon. Now Simon's
mother in law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked Jesus to
help her. So he bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She
got up at once and began to wait on them. When the sun was setting,
the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and*

laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, You are the Son of God! But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Christ. At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent. And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea. (Luke 4:38-44)

Son of God! Our passage today is from the Gospel of St Luke, and one of the distinctive features of this Gospel is the extensive Infancy narrative it contains. There is twice as much given on the Infancy in Luke than that provided in the Gospel of St Matthew, and it is not hard to divine that Mary is the principal source, whether directly or indirectly. The birth, the mission and the titles of Jesus are introduced by the Angel Gabriel in his address to Mary. The Angel announces to her that she is to conceive a son whose name will be Jesus. He will be

great. What is to be observed is that the first of the titles the Angel gives to him is precisely "*the Son of the Most High*." The second is that of (*Messiah*) *King*, ruling over God's people in an eternal kingdom. While the chosen people expected the coming of the Messiah, the first and foremost thing which the Angel announces is that Jesus will be the *Son of the Most High*. At Mary's puzzlement in view of her virginity, he emphasizes the point again: "*the Holy One to be born will be called Son of God*" (Luke 1:32-35). The words of Elizabeth, inspired by the Spirit, may be seen as a vague allusion to this exalted title: "*How is it that I am visited by the mother of my Lord?*" Christ's title of Son of God came in the first instance from the Angel Gabriel speaking on God's behalf. It was a revelation from heaven delivered to Mary his mother. This same revelation is made once again in the Infancy narrative, and this time it comes from the lips of Jesus Christ himself. At the end of their three days' search, Mary and Joseph found the boy Jesus in the Temple with the doctors. His reply to their exclamation is profoundly revealing, and doubtless is the reason why Mary reported it, and why Luke recorded it. "*Why were you seeking*

me?" Jesus said to them. "Did you not know that I had to be about my Father's matters (en tois to patros mou)?" From his earliest years, Christ had the same consciousness of being the Son of God that he later displayed and revealed during his public ministry. Jesus spoke of God as *his own Father*, and his last breath was a final cry to God under this distinctive title (Luke 23:46).

This, then, is the principal thing about Jesus Christ. He is not the Son of God because he is the Messiah, but if anything, he is the Messiah because he is the Son of God. His divine sonship is the greatest and most fundamental thing about Jesus of Nazareth – and it is the point where there is a great leap ahead in the divine plan and revelation. The title "sons of God" was not uncommon in the Old Testament. It referred at times to angels, at times to human judges or rulers, at times to the ruler of Israel, at times to Israel as a people. It was a title used in the pagan world too. But Christ's use of the title was utterly unique. "*Before Abraham ever was,*" he said, "*I am.*" "*I and the Father are one,*" he claimed. In 42 BCE, Julius Caesar was formally

deified as "the divine Julius" (*divus Iulius*). His adopted son, Octavian (better known by the title "Augustus" given to him 15 years later, in 27 BC) thus became known as "*divi Iuli filius*" (son of the divine Julius) or simply "*divi filius*" (son of the Divine One), because of his being the adopted son of Julius Caesar. He used this title to advance his political position. But, of course, all that was meant was that he was the son of a god, which is to say a *deified ancestor*. It was a form of ancestor worship. Christ, though, claimed to be the *only Son of the one and only God*. Indeed, this was to claim equality with the one God. Nothing like this had been heard of or imagined in the history of God's chosen people, and there was no exact parallel to it in the vagaries of polytheism, be they Roman, Greek, Egyptian, or whatever. The leaders of the Jews saw perfectly clearly that, in speaking of God as his own personal Father, Jesus was making himself equal to God, and so they sought even the more to kill him (John 5:18). The point is that this is and was the pre-eminent fact about Jesus of Nazareth, and the devils in our Gospel scene today were wide awake to it. We read that "*When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds*

of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, You are the Son of God! But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Christ" (Luke 23:46).

The entire netherworld was filled with consternation at this new Arrival. They were now confronted with One who transcended all, and before whom they were powerless. God become man was afoot. The broken and suffering world, ultimately the work of Satan and sin, was now being re-shaped by a hand stronger than any other force in the universe. Jesus Christ was and is all-powerful because he is the Son of the living God, equal to the Father, and sharing fully the Father's nature. What a tragedy it is to fall away from him! Let us take our stand with him then, and fight to the finish.

A Second Reflection: (1 Corinthians 3:1-9)

The Work of God in Our Life In St Paul's words to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3: 1-9) we are reminded of a great work that is going on in our

souls as a result of the ministry of the Church. We are "*God's farm, God's building*" (vs.9). God "*makes things grow*," he writes. The growth is directed towards transforming each of us into another Christ, living his life. This is an astounding adventure, the one thing necessary to be achieved in the brief span of life we have been given. Conversely, we are also God's servants and fellow workers who are called to labour in this farm, this building God is constructing. Our privilege is to play a part in its growth in the likeness of Christ. God will be making things grow through our efforts. In this way the results of our labours will endure for eternity.

So let us use our time to labour, to labour in union with the Lord, knowing that "*each will be paid according to his share in the work. We are fellow workers with God; you are God's farm, God's building.*"



Thursday of the Twenty-second Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 3:18-23; Psalm 23; Luke 5:1-11

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding round him and listening to the word of God, he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down

and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch. Simon answered, Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets. When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man! For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men. So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. (Luke 5: 1-11)

Following Christ St Paul never met Christ prior to his Ascension. If he had, he would doubtlessly have alluded to it in his Letters. Inasmuch as Paul studied under Gamaliel in Jerusalem, he

may have heard of Jesus of Nazareth when our Lord was engaged in his public ministry, but we do not know. He met the glorious, risen Jesus for the first time on his way to Damascus, while hunting the followers of the Way (Acts 9: 4). One gathers that he met the glorious Christ on other occasions too – for instance, when he returned to Jerusalem from Damascus, he met him again, this time in the Temple (Acts 22: 17-18). Did Paul know much about the life of Jesus Christ apart from what he was told by the risen Jesus himself as a revelation? I suspect he knew from reliable sources a great deal about the life of Jesus Christ. For instance, St Paul in writing of the appearances of Christ after his resurrection, provides us with some information not given in the Gospel accounts. He tells us that after showing himself to Cephas and the Twelve, to which the Gospels allude (Luke 24: 34-36), Christ appeared to *"five hundred of the brethren at once ... After that, he was seen by James and all the apostles. And last of all he was seen by me also.."* (1 Corinthians 15: 5-8). There were plenty of people around who could tell Paul about the life and death of Jesus. But there is this: there is the information gathered and recorded by *Luke*, Paul's

companion. The Acts of the Apostles alone makes clear that Luke was an associate of Paul in many of his missionary travels, and Paul himself refers to Luke as "*the beloved physician*," and his "*fellow labourer*." We do not know when Luke began his remarkable labour of writing his Gospel and the Acts, but presumably his information-gathering had at least begun during his years of close friendship with Paul. Paul may have insistently urged him to pursue the work. In this painstaking investigation, Luke gained a profound knowledge of the history of Christ's life and of the years of the Church immediately following the Ascension. We may presume he met and interviewed the mother of Jesus for his Infancy material. St Paul would have had an extraordinarily good source of information in Luke.

The point is that in these two persons, Luke and Paul, companions and collaborators in the great mission, we have individuals who did not know Christ in the flesh on earth, but who gained an extraordinarily intimate knowledge of him. The inspired writings of each as they appear in the New Testament are about equal in length, and

their combined writing constitutes approximately half of the New Testament. Luke provided a magnificent statement of the *facts*, and Paul provided a magnificent statement of the *meaning* of them. Luke presented his careful history of Jesus Christ, and Paul explains what it means to live in him. Luke presented his history of the early Church, and Paul gives us his master experience and teaching on the Church as Christ's *body*. Luke even provides us with Paul's basic experience of Christ speaking of the Church as *himself* (Acts 9:5). I cannot believe that there was not a profound interchange between the two on what each was thinking and writing. Of course, we cannot be sure that Luke was researching and writing at the same time as he was serving as companion to Paul, but I strongly suspect that at least he was doing some of it. I mention these two examples of ardent disciples who did not know Christ in the flesh, but who followed our Lord as generously as those whom Luke reports in our Gospel today. Luke tells us of Christ's first companions who received his call and left all to follow him. In our passage today, Luke tells us of Peter, James and John – whom Paul refers to in one of his Letters as the "pillars" of the early

Church (Galatians 2:9). What did these "pillars" do when Christ first called them? *"When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man! For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men. So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him"* (Luke 5: 1-11). In Luke's Gospel account, these "pillars" were exemplary benchmarks of instant response to Christ. He, a "second-generation" Christian, as it were, holds up their example of total response to the call of Christ.

Let us look to their example, too. When Simon saw what Christ had done, he was struck with humble and self-abasing awe. *"Then Jesus said to Simon, Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men. So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him."* Let us hear that same call in our hearts. Christ wishes each of us to follow him and to participate in his mission. We do this in

accordance with our God-given vocation whatever it might be, and according to our circumstances of life. Let us live every day as Christ's true companions, sharing in his toils so as to share in his Kingdom.

A Second Reflection: (1 Cor. 3:18-23)

The Wisdom of God One of the things which the deeply convinced Christian who studies the history of philosophy and human thought notices is, how wide of the mark from Revelation are the ideas of so many great minds. Such a study illustrates what St Paul says in today's first reading (1 Corinthians 3: 18-23), that the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. However, if we live in Christ and allow our thinking to be imbued with the revealed wisdom of God, then a great deal in human thought can be recognised as worthwhile and appropriated by the human mind. On that basis we can think very positively of the efforts of the wise of this world. The study of human culture, human thought, and the religions of man can enhance the life of the Christian, provided he approaches it, and judges of it, with the mind of Christ.

Let us grow in the mind of Christ, and introduce others to the spirit and mind of Christ so that human culture can be evangelised from within.

Friday of the Twenty-second Week of Ordinary Time

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Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Psalm 36; Luke 5:33-39

They said to Jesus, John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking. Jesus answered, Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast. He told them this parable: No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.' (Luke 5:33-39)

The Bridegroom The disciples of John the Baptist were disciples of an outstanding and wonderful master. Their teacher was, according to our Lord himself, without peer. No-one greater than he had been born of woman, our Lord once said – going on, however, to place membership in the Kingdom of Heaven higher still (Matthew

11:11). When we look at the Gospel account, we can see three things marking the religious life of John. He was a man of tremendous prayer and self-denial. The young John "*grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the wilderness until his manifestation to Israel*" (Luke 1:80). He was dressed with camel skins and ate locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6). He lived for God in prayer and self-denial. At the same time, he directed all – people, publicans and soldiers – to be just and merciful to others, especially towards the needy (Luke 3: 10-14). In his life and teaching he was in the direct line of the prophets, and in the Sermon on the Mount our Lord presumes the same pillars of religious life (Matthew 6: 2-18): that is, prayer, self-denial and works of mercy. John had many disciples, and the Acts of the Apostles records how missionary Christians came across pockets of disciples of John in various parts of Asia Minor. They feature in the Gospels too. In the Gospel of St Matthew (9:14) they approach Jesus following his refutation of the Pharisees at his dining with publicans and sinners. They ask our Lord, why is it that "*we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not?*" In his account of this, St Mark writes that

"they" – probably meaning just "people" – came to Jesus and pointed to the practice of fasting by the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees. His disciples, though, did not fast (2:18). In our passage today from Luke (Luke 5: 33-39), it is now Christ's opponents (the scribes and Pharisees) who put this objection. Further, there is a new twist: The "*disciples of John fast often and make prayers, as do those of the Pharisees also,*" but "*yours eat and drink*" (Luke 5:33). So the scribes and Pharisees are putting themselves in the company of John, and are including the practice of prayer.

All up, then, the disciples of John, the people, and the scribes and Pharisees – depending on which Gospel one is reading – place our Lord in the context of the religious tradition of their time and of the Old Testament, and find him wanting. He is not insisting on the standards of prayer and fasting of the religious leaders of the day – the scribes and Pharisees, and of the great prophet John. The disciples of John and various people are perplexed, while the scribes and Pharisees are simply critical. But as our Lord explains, they have got it wrong. He cannot be

simply placed among the religious leaders of the day, nor simply among the prophets. He transcends them all, and his presence is a cause of rejoicing for the time being. He is the Bridegroom come among the people. It cannot be regarded as business as usual, in a religious sense. A new start is being made, and the new start has to be totally appreciated. Jesus Christ came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, and he is the fulfilment of them – "*Can any of you convict me of sin?*" he challenged his opponents. "*I always do what pleases him,*" he observed of his relationship with his heavenly Father. He is sinless, and he has come to take away the sin of the world. The fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets in him was a new beginning. It could not be regarded as a mere addition to what was present before – this would be a mere sewing on of yet another patch. Rather a new garment is now present – and a bit of the new cannot be sewn on to the old. Nor is new wine poured into old wineskins. The point in our Lord's answer is that in him there is something utterly new, but long alluded to in revealed religion. Christ is the *Bridegroom* – and all who knew the prophets knew of the *Bridegroom*. The *Bridegroom* was Yahweh God, and the

Bride was his covenanted people. John the Baptist himself had referred to Jesus as the *Bridegroom* (John 3: 29). Our Lord is telling his interlocutors that they must not regard him as simply yet another prophet or religious teacher. He is the *Bridegroom* of the chosen people, and the overriding thing at this point was to appreciate that. It is this which he wished his own disciples to understand.

The time would come, with this altogether new basis of religion laid, for his disciples to pray continuously, to live a life of self-denial in imitation of him who chose the path of the cross, and to love all others in the way he loved them. But the basis must first be laid. The basis of revealed religion is the person of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of Heaven consists in union with him and living accordingly. He is the heart, the soul and the Object of religion. This must not be missed – as it could be, with an excessive emphasis on other things at this early stage. Jesus Christ is the life of the Christian. As St Paul writes, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21).

A Second Reflection: (Luke 5:33-39)

Then They Will Fast

Our Lord tells his critics that once he, the Bridegroom, is taken away from his disciples, then they certainly will fast (Luke 5: 33-35). Our Lord refers to the future, indicating our situation now in which Jesus is no longer visibly among us. He is no longer visibly among us, but he is very much with us nevertheless. Our Lord said that anyone who loves him will keep his word, and that then he and his Father will love him and come to him and make their abode with him. So he is in us, and by grace we are in him. The essential purpose of this indwelling is that by the action and power of the Holy Spirit, we will be transformed into the likeness of Christ our bridegroom. This transformation means, as St Paul often insisted, being crucified with Christ so as to experience the power of his resurrection — his risen life. Being one with the crucified Jesus — especially in the Holy Eucharist and Mass — means following in his footsteps by carrying our cross daily. Thus we must, to use our Lord's word in the Gospel passage, "fast". We must expiate with Jesus for our sins and those of others by daily renunciation.

"But the time will come, the time for the bridegroom to be taken away from them; that will be the time when they will fast."



Saturday of the Twenty-second Week in Ordinary Time

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Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 4:6-15; Psalm 114; Luke 6:1-5

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and his disciples began to pick some ears of corn, rub them in their hands and eat the grain. Some of the Pharisees asked, Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? Jesus answered them, Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered

the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions. Then Jesus said to them, The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. (Luke 6:1-5)

Lord of the Sabbath In modern times we take the five or six-day working week so much for granted that we forget what a radical concept a day of rest was in ancient times. The weekly day of rest had no exact parallel in any other ancient civilisation. Leisure was for the wealthy and the ruling classes and never for the serving or labouring classes. The idea of a religious rest day each week was seldom imagined. I have read a reference to Juvenal and Seneca calling the Sabbath “an example of Jewish indolence.” Ancient Egypt had numerous feasts, but not a regular Sabbath. It is to be noted that among the Ten Commandments — that pivotal charter for the living of revealed religion — the Sabbath is the one command involving a specific religious observance. The Sabbath observance thus holds rank with the other nine commandments. Moreover, it even found an

important place in the first account of creation (Genesis 1). God is portrayed as resting at the end of his working week. His people are pleasing to God if they do likewise, then. Not only was the Sabbath observance pivotal in the practice of revealed religion, but it has been a major inheritance of Israel to the world. Though the sanctity of the day of rest is largely lost, the idea of the Sabbath rest at the end of the week is accepted everywhere — even the word “a sabbatical” is in common use. I say this to introduce the critical position of the Sabbath in the religious life of Israel in our Lord’s time, and the sensitive question of how man was to take his religious rest on that day. The Pharisees and their school had developed an elaborate system that, in their view, protected the Sabbath and ensured its fundamental place. Christ disregarded many of their specific regulations and showed that in their zeal for their own religious customs they had quite forgotten the weightier matters of the divine Law. There was a direct collision between many of the dominant religious party of the day and our Lord, and a principal issue was the observance of the Sabbath. Jesus sovereignly set aside many of their prescriptions on how this fourth

commandment was to be observed. It was becoming increasingly a question of authority. Whose authority was supreme?

Our Gospel today (Luke 6:1-5) presents one occasion of this conflict. The disciples are spotted picking ears of corn on the Sabbath day and the scribes and Pharisees bring forward their complaint. Jesus' disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath. What they are doing is not unlawful, Christ replied, and he cited the practice of David. He is pointing to the Scriptures and proving the correctness of his interpretation of the Sabbath. But he does more than show that he himself is a much greater *interpreter* of the Sabbath. He is the Sabbath's *Lord*! Now, this is an astonishing remark and it was made calmly in the presence of his enemies who were determined to catch him out in his words. No prophet had ever said such a thing — it would have been preposterous to have suggested that Moses made such a claim. The Sabbath was the Lord's Day, and here was someone stating that he himself was the Lord of the Sabbath. Who was the Lord of the Sabbath, but the Lord God of Israel? While at his trial before the

Sanhedrin our Lord claimed to be divine and was put to death for it, he also made similar claims during his public ministry. We read of his being accosted by the religious authorities and, at their questioning, making the plainest of claims. *I and the Father are one*, he said to them. *The Father works, so I work. Before Abraham ever was, I am*. Here in our Gospel passage he speaks thus again. I am the Lord of the Sabbath. It is, in effect, yet another allusion to his divinity. He cannot be reduced to yet another religious authority that competes with the authority of the scribes and Pharisees. He is unique and he transcends all. Let our reading of this passage prompt us once again to acknowledge *Jesus Christ as Lord*, Lord of the Sabbath and Lord of all. Let us also note that in Christ's answer to the religious authorities he accepts the Sabbath — so let us truly accept it! We ought ask ourselves how we sanctify the Sunday. Is it a mere day of secular rest and recreation, or does it have an active religious dimension? Is it a day given to the Lord, and only in the Lord, a day of rest?

In the Old Testament, God commands his people to be holy, for he is holy (Leviticus 11:44). It is a command repeated by St Peter in his Letter (1 Peter 1:15): “*be holy in all your conduct.*” The Church has insisted constantly on the gravity of the Sabbath observance, which the Christian marks on the Sunday, the day of the Lord’s resurrection. Let us receive the baton of sanctity and run with it, resolving to make the observance of the Sabbath a fundamental feature of our Christian life, in which we acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord.

A Second Reflection: (1 Corinthians 4:6-13)

Spiritual Fatherhood It goes without saying that being a parent is a beautiful vocation. The parent generates new life and in so doing cooperates with God in bringing into being an immortal person with marvellous possibilities. But when we think of it, *merely* being a parent, *merely* bringing a new life into the world is not very grand *if* it is not accompanied by an earnest effort to *bring the life of God* to the child. It is this second calling which is obviously the greater. St Paul tells the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4: 13) that he is their sole spiritual father,

having endowed them with life in Christ. By engaging in the mission of the Church in our everyday life we all share in that spiritual parenthood that brings Christ to others. The Church is the spouse of Christ and our spiritual mother. As members of the Church we are all called to a new kind of parentage, helping to generate in others the new life in Christ which God intends for them, and then to come to full maturity in Christ.

How wonderful it will be to meet in heaven those whom we have helped to beget in God!



Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and
your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful
love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption,
look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who
believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting
inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and
reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and
ever.

Scripture today: Wisdom 9:13-19; Psalm 89;
Philemon 9-10.12-17; Luke 14:25-33

Great crowds were travelling with Jesus, and he turned and addressed them, “If anyone comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after

me cannot be my disciple. Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlookers should laugh at him and say, 'This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish.' Or what king marching into battle would not first sit down and decide whether with ten thousand troops he can successfully oppose another king advancing upon him with twenty thousand troops? But if not, while he is still far away, he will send a delegation to ask for peace terms. In the same way, anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:25-33)

The Cost Our Gospel today tells us that great crowds accompanied Jesus on his way. Many in the crowds may have regarded themselves as disciples of Jesus. They were accompanying Jesus, but would they continue to accompany him when they heard all of his teaching, and when they experienced the difficulties involved in following him? We only have to remember what happened when our Lord, in the sixth

chapter of St John, said that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. Having heard this, very many left him. That is to say, it was one thing to go along as part of the crowd, perhaps hoping to benefit from his miracles. It was interesting, even exciting, and while it lasted they probably felt that any inconvenience that was involved was worth it. But being a real disciple involved a cost. Were they prepared to pay the cost of being Christ's disciples? And this is what we ought ask ourselves as we ponder on this text. Am I just one of the crowd accompanying Jesus along his way because it is convenient and keeps life interesting and bearable, or am I prepared to be a true disciple and pay the price? Let us consider what our Lord says about the cost. The crowds following him would have been there for a whole variety of reasons, and would have had a variety of attitudes towards him, and Jesus knew it. He turned to the crowds and spoke to them, and he put it very bluntly. He said: *"If any man comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple. Anyone who does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple"* (Luke 14:25-33). Our Lord

wanted to the crowds following him to hear the stark choice. Christ regarded his disciples as those who chose him decisively, and were prepared to go with him no matter what it required. And this is just the danger: we can be influenced away from our Lord by those persons or things we love or like.

We normally accede to the wishes of those we love, and usually the sign that we do not love something or someone is that we disregard that person's requests. It can look as though we are almost "hating" that person, so great is the upset we cause him or her by our course of action. Our Lord is telling us that love for him is to be the deepest love of our life, the love that comes first. Our Lord was once asked, which is the first commandment of the Law? He answered: "*This is the first, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength.*" Our Lord is not telling us that we are not to love our family and our loved ones. The fourth commandment commands honour to one's father and one's mother. Christ's own command was that we "*love one another as I*

have loved you.” He also said that this would be the sign by which all men would know that we are his disciples, that we love one another. In revealed religion we cannot love God without loving one another. Our Lord asks of us the highest loyalty to and love for himself, knowing that this is in the best interests of all. Living this out might on occasion give the mistaken impression to someone close to us that we are ruthlessly disregarding his or her wishes and feelings. If God makes certain demands and our spouse or family makes contrary demands we have to say “Yes” to God and “No” to spouse and family. St Thomas More had to say “No” to his spouse and family in standing firm in his profession against the King. A spouse may pressure one to engage in fraud, theft, deceit, contraception or even abortion. It has to be “Yes” to God’s law and “No” to the contrary. Another instance might be, being absolutely faithful to one’s spouse even if one is separated from one’s spouse. And it means being faithful to that separated spouse, even if that separated spouse goes on to be unfaithful in further ways. We must put Jesus first, and Jesus said, if you love me you will keep my commands.

We shall grow in this love for Jesus if we think long and often on his love for us. St Paul said, “Christ loved me and delivered himself up for me.” Let us think of those words, making them our own, saying them over and over in our hearts. Jesus carried his cross for me, so I am called to carry my own cross after him. *“Anyone who does not carry his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”* Jesus above all else, even above our own life, and no matter what the cost!

A Second Reflection for the Twenty-third Sunday

Happiness A well-known Australian politician gained notoriety many years ago when he said that life was not meant to be easy. Many ridiculed him for his statement — years later he stood by it, while saying it had been misunderstood. I never did understand the reason for the criticism. In various respects life is not easy, and for many it is in fact quite hard. That is not to say that life is not meant to be happy. The question is, in what does true happiness consist, and how is it to be attained? Inasmuch as God has implanted in our hearts a deep desire for happiness, we can assume that he means us to attain it, quite

apart from the fact that he has actually *revealed* this to be his plan. Now, it is obviously possible to go through life never being happy because of the choices we make, and then, after all that, losing out on happiness in the next life — again, because of our choices. On the other hand, Our Lord said that if we live in the way he directs, we shall have a hundredfold *in this life* and eternal glory *in the next*. How do we gain happiness, then? Many start out on life with certain *assumptions* about happiness. Some *assume* that the pursuit of wealth will bring happiness. So their lives are spent in acquiring possessions of various kinds. The pinnacle of their lives is reached when they have a beautiful home and an impressive car, together with a comfortable income. Others *assume* that becoming very well known and admired in some way will bring happiness. For others it is gaining power and influence. It is very important that we stop to consider just what is driving our lives, because we may not know ourselves. We may have made some very wrong assumptions.

Well, God has told us that we will be happy if we live *according to his plan*. God's plan is that we know, love and serve him here on earth and as a result, that we see and enjoy him forever in heaven. This, if put into effect, will bring us happiness. And who is God? God is Jesus Christ, just as he is the Father and just as he is the Holy Spirit. So, if we know Jesus Christ and love and serve him here on earth, we will be happy, and our happiness will last forever. This is the fundamental point. The next thing we must know is what it means to love and serve Jesus here on earth in everyday life. Our Lord alludes to this in the parable we heard in today's Gospel (Luke 14:25-33). A person needs to sit down and count the cost, calculating what is required to build the tower, or to meet the advancing enemy successfully. The cost, our Lord explains, is to take up one's cross and follow him daily. It means being prepared to give up anything for him, not allowing anything to come between ourselves and his holy will. It means putting the person of our Lord at the centre of all our daily duties and working for him with dedication, accompanying our work with a life of prayer and self-denial. This will bring the happiness God intends

for us in this life, and it will lead to happiness forever. Whereas if we spend our lives seeking more wealth, status, influence or whatever, we will never have the happiness God intended for us. Union with Jesus day by day, with the crosses this involves, is the secret to happiness.

There we have it. It is not hard to grasp, but it is hard to attain – but we have the grace of God to help us be resolute in seeking the goal. The goal is love for Jesus and the following of him.

Further reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1718-1724 (The Desire for Happiness & Christian Happiness)



Monday of the Twenty-third Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 5:1-8; Psalm 5; Luke 6:6 11

On another Sabbath Jesus went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shrivelled. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the

shrivelled hand, Get up and stand in front of everyone. So he got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it? He looked round at them all, and then said to the man, Stretch out your hand. He did so, and his hand was completely restored. But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus. (Luke 6:6-11)

Man of Compassion

It is always helpful to consider the various Gospel accounts of the same event. At times there are almost identical textual accounts, but there are usually differences. For instance, *Mark's* account of the healing of the man with the withered hand in the Synagogue (3:1-6) follows Christ's conflict with the scribes and Pharisees in the previous chapter, and their criticism of his disciples' disregard of certain prescriptions on the Sabbath rest. They were seen to be picking grain on the Sabbath. *Matthew* too has the event immediately following on the Pharisees' criticism of the disciples picking grain on the Sabbath. The two accounts of the picking of the

grain are similar though not identical, suggesting a reliance of one text on the other. In each, there then follows the healing of the man with the withered hand in the Synagogue. In *Mark's* account – perhaps stemming from Simon Peter – the Pharisees simply watch to see if he would heal so that they might then accuse him. Our Lord takes the initiative, asking the man to stand forth. He then challenges the Pharisees to answer if it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it. They refuse to speak – and our Lord looks on them in anger at the hardness of their hearts. He then heals. In *Matthew's* account (12: 9-14), it is not Jesus but the Pharisees who ask the question if it is lawful to cure on the Sabbath. Our Lord answers by pointing to a common practice with respect to animals that are in need of rescue on the Sabbath – so of course it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath Day. He then proceeds to heal. *Mark's* account is the more graphic. With *Mark* there is no dialogue between Christ and his critics, and its notable feature is that Christ's *anger* is vividly described. In our Gospel today from *St Luke*, there is a closer agreement with the account of *Mark* than with *Matthew*. In *Luke* there are, though,

differences. Firstly, Jesus knows what the Pharisees are thinking. Secondly, while as in *Mark* Jesus is described as looking around on the Pharisees after challenging them with his question, there is omitted all reference to his holy anger, grieved at their hardness of heart. I mention these variations in the Gospel accounts just as an aside.

In our passage today from the Gospel of St Luke (Luke 6:6-11), we are told that Jesus entered the Synagogue and was teaching. That is the scene, and Jesus and the Pharisees – as do all in the Synagogue, perhaps – know that the man with the withered hand is present in the congregation. Consider how great a debility this would have been for one in ancient times! The withered hand may have been due to a stroke, or a terrible injury, or some other circumstance. The other two Gospels do not mention a detail which St Luke includes, that it was his *right* hand that was withered. So it looks as if he was a right-handed man, adding to his helplessness. How limited he would have been in his performance of work, how limited in his ability to answer to his own

needs. It was a very significant affliction, and there he was in the congregation. In the face of this human need, all that the Pharisees were thinking of was that the presence of this unfortunate man would give them the chance they are looking for. If the Galilean heals the withered hand, they have won! His compassion will have delivered him into their hands. By contrast Christ, either having finished his Synagogue discourse or interrupting it, courageously takes the initiative and asks the man with the withered hand to stand and step forward, which he does. We know the sequel: Christ challenges his enemies to answer his question, and at their failure to do so, heals the man's hand. It is a revelation of his power and courage at the service of his compassion. His critics are no match for him, and Christ is shown as never swayed by human respect or opinion. Everyone knows this, too. Elsewhere, in each of the three Synoptic Gospels an account is given of the question posed to Christ about payment of taxes to Caesar. In their introduction to this question, they acknowledge Christ's absolute integrity. He taught the way of God in all truth (e.g., Luke 20:21), without fear of his hearers' rank. In our Gospel today, these

features of Christ's personality show. He is compassionate to the needy, fearless before his enemies, and he spoke the truth, whoever the recipient may be. Oh! How admirable a Man, this Man of compassion!

Let us place ourselves in our Gospel scene today and contemplate the Person before us. Never has there been One like him before, and never will there be One like him after. In being his friend, we have every heavenly blessing. Let us not take him for granted. Let us not set ourselves against him as did the Pharisees, understanding well that the slightest deliberate venial sin does precisely this, to a point. We must fight sin, and take our stand with Jesus Christ. He is compassionate, fearless, strong. As St Paul writes, Christ loved me, and gave himself up for me. Christ invites me to love him and to serve him all my days.

A Second Reflection: (1 Corinthians 5:1-8)

Sin In our first reading (1 Corinthians 5: 1-8), St Paul condemns a great sin of which one of the Corinthians is guilty, and for which he excommunicates him. He then uses an image to show how the Christian can be overcome by sin. He says that "*even a small amount of yeast is enough to leaven all the dough.*" So, he says, "*get rid of all the old yeast.*" The old yeast is sin. Like yeast, it can affect everything in us. In his letter to the Romans, St Paul writes that the wages of sin are death. In our passage today, St Paul says that we are to get rid of all this old yeast – all of it. This means combating and overcoming all deliberate sin, and making of ourselves "*a completely new batch of bread, unleavened as you are meant to be.*" The "new batch of bread" is not a new and different nature but "*the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth,*" our own nature purified of sin and elevated by grace. That is to say, we are to strive to become immersed in Christ.

The power to do this comes from Christ who is present and active in the Sacraments. We must constantly recognise him in them

with a lively faith, a faith nourished by prayer and attentiveness to his word.



Tuesday of the Twenty-third Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 6:1-11; Psalm 149; Luke 6:12-19

Jesus departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God. When day came, he called his disciples to himself, and from them he chose Twelve, whom he also named Apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon

who was called a Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. And he came down with them and stood on a stretch of level ground. A great crowd of his disciples and a large number of the people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and even those who were tormented by unclean spirits were cured. Everyone in the crowd sought to touch him because power came forth from him and healed them all. (Luke 6:12-19)

Our Call Our Gospel scene today is situated in the context of several disputes with the religious leaders, healings of the afflicted, Christ teaching in towns, houses and synagogues, and the special call of various of his disciples such as Simon, James and John (chapters 5 and 6). The summons to Levi (Matthew) is specifically mentioned, followed by the feast in Levi's house attended by many “publicans and sinners,” as the Pharisees called them. Christ was calling certain individuals, others were gathering around him and were becoming disciples, and there were the crowds following and in attendance. In

our passage today Luke refers to these groups: there are "*a great crowd of his disciples and a large number of people.*" So the disciples are of a considerable number – a "multitude" of them. These are in greater attendance on Jesus than the crowds and have chosen to learn from him. They are drawn to his Person and teaching and manifest various levels of commitment to him. We read elsewhere in the Gospels that Jesus sent seventy-two out ahead of him in pairs to prepare the people for his coming by their preaching. We read in the Gospel of St John that many disciples abandoned our Lord precisely over his teaching – it was his teaching on the Eucharist that led to their walk-out. But others were faithful. For instance, we read in the Letters of St Paul that five hundred of the brethren witnessed the risen Jesus on one occasion. They were disciples who had been faithful to him, though doubtless to varying degrees and in different ways. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were among the rulers of the Jews, but secretly. Martha, Mary and Lazarus all from the one family, were disciples and dear friends of Jesus, though not, it seems, actively engaged with him in his travelling mission. Matthias had been a

disciple of our Lord from the beginning, and he was chosen to replace Judas as one of the Twelve. So Christ had many disciples, and there was the crowd that followed along. Well now, in which group are *we*?

A new stage in our Lord's work had been reached. The crowds were flocking to him – and that would wax and wane. There were many disciples, and several had been personally summoned by our Lord to follow him. This they did – though some refused. One instance of a refusal was the rich young man. He came to our Lord with his question about how to get to heaven. After their initial dialogue, our Lord looked on him and loved him. He then invited him to leave all and follow him. But he refused and went off home, sad. There may have been others, but many were following our Lord. So our Lord now moves to begin the decisive work of building his Church which would be the bearer and the beginning of the Kingdom. The foundation stones had to be selected. New patriarchs had to be gathered around him to share his friendship and his life, and to be the basis of the new chosen people, the Kingdom. So serious was this that he spent the whole night

in prayer to God – we do not read of this process happening in any other call. For instance, several passages before our text of today, our Lord goes out of the house, catches sight of Levi, and calls him to follow him (5:27). It is a simple invitation, and Levi immediately responds. It is the same with Simon, James and John (5:11). We are not told if, say, Simon the Zealot, Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, were among the disciples because of Christ's personal invitation to them, or whether it was due to their own decision to have him for their Master. Whatever be the personal path of this or that disciple within the concourse of his disciples, Christ now makes a supremely formal call to some of them. Of course, there is never a mistake with Christ. He formally selects certain of them to be members of the Twelve. Imagine his hand falling on Judas. There was no mistake. Judas had the calling to be an Apostle of Christ, one of the Twelve, a great saint. He had been led by the grace of God through his youth to the point of his meeting with Jesus Christ. Christ knew and loved him personally, and selected him above numerous others. What an honour! What a unique trust, to be one of the very Twelve.

Some have taught that ultimately our destiny is determined. I think this is maintained in order to preserve the doctrine of God's sovereignty. How could God be sovereign if, contrary to his will, someone were to be damned? But no. Judas was destined by God to be a great saint. That was the divine plan. Christ deliberately chose him to be one of the Twelve. What promise he must have had – with, of course, his faults too. But how badly he turned out! He was an unspeakably grave disappointment to our Lord. Each of us is called, just as Simon Peter, Levi, and Judas were called. Let us live up to our God-given promise, and not make the Holy Spirit sad.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 6: 12-19)

Christ's Choice In this pivotal passage (Luke 6:12-19) St Luke tells us of our Lord at prayer all night long to his heavenly Father. He was preparing to establish his Church and to choose its foundations — the Twelve Apostles. We can only imagine the care and love he put into that choice, reflecting as it did the choice of the Father. It was the choice of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There could be no mistake about

it. As we think of that choice, we ought think of the choice he has made of each of *us*. St Paul tells us that before the world began God chose us, chose us in Christ to be holy and full of love in his sight. We are called, each of us by name. We can imagine our Lord calling each of the Twelve, and calling each of them by name. From all eternity they too had been chosen, as have we. Christ gave the Apostles a work to do. They were to be his ambassadors, his "apostles". They were to be sent out by him to represent him and to do his work.

Each of us in our own way and according to our vocation is called to be an ambassador for Christ. Each of us is called to be another Christ by the transforming power of his grace, doing his work in and through our own work. Let us sanctify our work, thus sanctifying ourselves and others in the process, and being apostles in fact.

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Wednesday of the Twenty-third Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Colossians 3:1-11; Psalm 145:2-3, 10-13ab;
 Luke 6:20-26

Looking at his disciples, Jesus said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and

insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets. (Luke 6:20-26)

Blessings

There is a pattern in the Old Testament which is important to notice – so as to understand our Gospel passage today. God called Abraham from his family and land to go to where he would send him. He promised him the blessing of a land that would be his, and through him a blessing for all the families of the earth. The Patriarchs were called to accept the Lord as their God and to obey him – and various blessings would be theirs, almost always of a *temporal* nature. The time came when God spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush. Declaring that he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he

said that had compassion for the misery of his people. He was resolved to bring them out and would lead them to their own land. Moses would be their leader. He was a God of mercy, compassion and blessings. The blessings, once again, were primarily of a *temporal* character. The liberation of the children of Israel was magnificent. Out they came, with the misery of slavery behind them, and the long trek through the wilderness began. There were more difficulties – such as lack of food. But God answered their need with manna and quails. For these blessings, God expected obedience to his moral and religious law enshrined in the Ten Commandments and in the Torah. When there was disobedience, they were deprived of these *temporal* blessings. For instance, Moses failed in faith and obedience on one occasion, and he was deprived of the privilege of entering the Promised Land. When the chosen people, now led by Joshua, left the wilderness and entered the land, their obedience brought blessings and victories. Again, by and large they were of a *temporal* character. The Books of Judges, Samuel and Kings all convey a similar point. When Solomon began to fall away from the Lord, temporal reversals followed despite the great gifts

he had been given. The Northern Kingdom fell and its people were deported, and at a later stage Jerusalem and Judea also fell and its people were deported – and the prophets gave its meaning. It happened because the people fell away from obedience to the Lord. But the point being made here is that the blessings and the reversals were generally of a *temporal* character. These were the incentives, the rewards and the punishments of religion. We could go on to make the point that across the ages and for the generality of mankind, religion is broadly lived in order to gain the best advantage of *this* life.

Of course, it is not as simple as that. The whole point of this divine pedagogy was to train the chosen people, through his servants the prophets and other inspired leaders, to love him and to live in communion with him through faith and obedience. This *communion with the true God*, the God of Abraham, Moses and the prophets, was the blessing *par excellence* which would come from fidelity. Still, temporal blessings and punishments were very much the divine method. What this meant in practice was that many thought that the

principal blessing of religion and its primary incentive was precisely temporal blessings. Indeed, the Afterlife was somewhat shadowy – and the Sadducees, understanding themselves to be based strictly on the Torah, denied the resurrection of the dead. Very many looked to the eventual Messiah as the saviour in a temporal sense. He would deliver the people from political and economic oppression, as had Moses delivered the people from slavery in Egypt. It was a constant problem for our Lord himself, who avoided the public use of the Messianic title – because of its temporal connotations. I suggest that this is one of the backdrops for the famous and pivotal Beatitudes – of which we have one version in today’s Gospel (Luke 6:20-26). Luke’s presentation of Christ’s blessings and woes is briefer than Matthew’s, less Semitic perhaps and possibly a version of it given by our Lord on certain occasions. But what is plain is that our Lord assures his “disciples” that their bearing reversals and enduring what he would call on other occasions “the cross” did not mean that they were not blessed. On the contrary, if they were truly his disciples, such very adverse situations were a blessing (in disguise). Especially is this so if their sufferings

were a direct result of their discipleship. *Looking at his disciples, Jesus said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.* By contrast, the one who seeks and finds his home in temporal blessings, and not in union with God, is the subject of woes. *But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.*

Our Lord is not urging his disciples to reject the blessings of this world, the blessings which will inevitably pass away – simply because they are temporal. No, but he wants our hearts to be in the right place. We are to use the things of this world to help us find our treasure in God both here and hereafter. We are to be absolutely on guard against the ever-present danger of becoming attached to the good things of this world (all of which come from God), forgetting the Father in

heaven from whom they come. If we do forget God and make our home in them, woe to us! Further again, he assures us that if such blessings for one reason or another are taken away from us – then *blessed are we* if, all the while we are trying to do the will of God. We shall receive a great reward. Indeed, especially if we suffer deprivation for the name of Jesus Christ, how great will be our reward! The supreme blessing, the Blessing in whom is found every heavenly blessing, is *Christ*!



Thursday of the Twenty-third Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 8:1-7.11-13; Psalm 138;
 Luke 6:27-38

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give

to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners', expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Luke 6:27-38)

Humiliation

Towards the end of the 1850s, John Henry Newman finished his period as first Rector of the Catholic University in Dublin. It had been a period of severe frustration and some injustice. Especially hurtful was the injustice coming from Bishops and collaborators. For instance, in a letter to an Oratorian colleague (Father John Flanagan) he writes, "*A great deal has happened since you went. Father Faber tells people openly that Cardinal Wiseman said to him of me 'He has shelved himself.' Faber is so open (about it)...*" (January 5, 1859). Soon after, he wrote to a convert and in the course of the letter, observed that "*I wish to bear my cross, which (strange to say) has been almost lifelong, without talking of it ... and I am sure a lighter cross could not be, nor would I change it, nor be without it... in my heart and judgment I wish to have my reward, whatever it is, hereafter not here – yet it is a burden to my feelings, which others relieve by such kind words as yours are, to reflect that I busy myself from morning to night, with so little thanks from any one. Now for thirteen years, I have been in many true senses a servant; ... with no object or will of my own; yet never was a time, when*

apparently I am more likely than now to be visited with those suspicions and jealousies which in one shape or other have been my portion through life. Well I am used to it, and it does not matter to me..." (Epiphany, 1859). Newman, an outstanding Christian mind of the nineteenth century, had long and hidden experience of being humiliated, slighted, maligned. Moreover, he had the intellectual sagacity to be fully aware of what was said of him. But he bore it in the spirit of Christ and his sufferings led him to sanctity. Beatified by Pope Benedict in September 2010, he is yet another example of the power of suffering to lead to holiness – suffering borne in union with Jesus Christ. Our Lord, time and again, told his disciples that the Messiah had to suffer in order to enter his glory. When Simon Peter tried to dissuade him from the path of the Cross, our Lord severely reprimanded him, calling him "Satan". The plan of God is that glory is attained by obedient suffering, and especially humiliation.

Humiliation causes real suffering. If a person speaks disrespectfully, or harshly, or in a way that misrepresents – this causes

an injury and humiliation. In previous eras it often led to a duel, with one or other of the parties being killed. The injured party could not live with the insult, and either he or the offending party was destroyed by sword or bullet. It is well-known that in sixteenth-century Spain (Spain being the superpower of Europe), personal honour was the supreme value, and slights to that honour were of grave import. There are still cultures in which a daughter who is regarded as wayward is put to death by the family – it is an “honour-killing”, as if this perceived slight of hers to *their* honour *justified* the crime. Human respect is a core value of the human being, and when it is wounded, the spirit of man revolts. But Christ has come with an altogether opposite message. He points to himself as meek and humble of heart in bearing personal slights and opprobrium. From all eternity he possessed the glory of God, and he became one of us to bear the loss of this glory, even to death on a cross. He died ingloriously in estimation of his detractors, and glory was its fruit. That the Cross is to be accepted and embraced is the most difficult of the teachings of Christ. If what is borne is not difficult, then it is not truly the Cross that is being borne. In our Gospel

today (Luke 6: 27-38) our Lord speaks of those who act towards us as would enemies. We are to love them and pray for them. *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back."* The problem is made more acute when it is good people who do the harm, and, from their perspective, do it for right and good motives. *"Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that."* Christ's doctrine is high and difficult, but how the world would be transformed were it to be generally lived!

When we are injured by others in word or in deed, let us immediately think of Christ and his teaching. He was injured as no-one else was, and he forgave. That is our model. Let us strive to imitate

him, asking for the grace of God to do so. We have a specimen of his teaching in our Gospel today (Luke 6: 27-38). Let us pray for the grace to live according to it, because it can only be done with the assistance of grace – prayer and the grace of the Sacraments. With the aid of this grace, humiliation, insult and injury will lead to glory. What saint attained sanctity without suffering and humiliation? Let that be our consolation, then.

A Second Reflection: (I Corinthians 8:1-7.11-13)

The Christian Conscience In his first letter to the Corinthians (ch.8:1-7.11-13) St Paul offers directions on something that is often appealed to: the *authority of one's conscience*. In effect St Paul says that the conscience of the "enlightened" person can be very unenlightened. In the case that he refers to here, it is of a person who has a correct understanding of what is objectively permitted (in this case, the eating of food that has been sacrificed to idols). But he takes no regard of the good of another who lacks this understanding and who observes his action. To take no regard of the good of the other means

that one's conscience is unenlightened. Acting accordingly will result in injury to that other person's "weak conscience", and it will be "Christ against whom you sinned." The weaker person's conscience is unenlightened too, but St Paul is not concerned with him in this passage.

During the whole of our life we ought be imbued with the mind and charity of Christ. We must be ever concerned with the sanctification and salvation of our brothers, even if it means curtailing our liberty to do what our conscience tells is perfectly permissible. Let us work daily to grow in the love and mind of Christ in everything – it is thus that our conscience will be truly enlightened.



Friday of the Twenty-third Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 9:16-19.22-27; Psalm 83; Luke 6:39-42

Jesus also told the people this parable: Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your

brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Luke 6:39-42)

Speck of Sawdust Of its nature, the universe is a cauldron of change. There is constant alteration and movement. This vast fact, as explored by great minds, is a principal way to God who is the changeless One – himself never altering because of the limitless richness of his being. Change! Motion! Alteration! Hurricanes come and go. Gradually forest lands become deserts. The world's entire population over one century is entirely replaced by another, and so it has been for aeons. Periods of peace burst into the flames of war. Autocratic regimes are engulfed in revolutions, to be replaced by succeeding dictatorships or democracies. Man sees before him beauty and ugliness in unfolding succession, and he strives to manage this changing world for his own flourishing. But I propose this, that what we see in the external world is but a reflection of the cauldron and

drama within man's own heart. The drama without is a reflection of the drama within. Indeed, the action within is of decisive importance for the action without. Our Lord said that it is not what goes inside a man that makes him unclean – which is to say, it is not the state of the world that is the decisive problem, for the basic problem is sin. It is what comes out of a man's heart that makes him unclean. It is sin which corrupts man, and we know from Revelation that it was the original sin of man that corrupted the world. Sin entered the world through one man, and with sin death entered and spread to the whole human race. The heart of man – which is to say his conscience and the sanctuary that is his inner spirit – is the real engine that drives the course of the outer, visible universe. Scarcely possible as it is to imagine, what would the world have been like if from the beginning mankind had been, and had remained, holy? What would the world have been like had it been populated by saints rather than sinners? It is the heart of man that contains the key to the health, the flourishing, and the temporal and eternal prosperity of man. But let us take this general point about sin to a more practical and concrete issue. What more

precisely is it in the heart of man that makes a tremendous difference to the life and community of man? I suggest it is largely *how we judge our brother.*

In his inspired Letter, St James speaks of the power of the human tongue to shape the world. *"When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide the rest of their bodies. It is the same with ships: however large they are, and despite the fact that they are driven by fierce winds, they are directed by very small rudders on whatever course the steersman's impulse may select. The tongue is something like that"* (3:3-5). St James continues with his simile, showing how the world is affected by what comes out of a man. *"See how tiny the spark is that sets a huge forest ablaze. The tongue is such a flame. It exists among our members as a whole universe of malice. The tongue defiles the entire body. Its flames encircle our course from birth, and its fire is kindled by hell"* (3:5-6). The tongue is but manifesting what is going on in the heart. St James asks, *"Where do the conflicts and disputes among you originate? Is it not your inner*

cravings that make war within your members? What you desire you do not obtain, and so you resort to murder. You envy and you cannot acquire..." (4:1-2). It is what man thinks and wants and chooses that shapes his life and the world around him. Let us be still more precise about man's thoughts and cravings. It is how in his heart he *judges his brother* that makes such a decisive difference. He is injured, either deliberately or unconsciously, and he judges his brother darkly. The late-19th century Lutheran missionary, Carl Strehlow, often reported of the aboriginal practice in Central Australia of avenging an accidental death by hunting down a nominated individual from another tribe. We too can be a little similar. Again, even if one is not injured at all, one still observes how a brother acts, and then criticizes, judges, despises him. That posture of the heart is decisive. We see sawdust in our neighbour's eye, and we think there is a lot of it there, indeed far too much. We dislike it, and we dislike him. In our Gospel today, Christ is explicit. *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you*

yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye?" (Luke 6:39-42). The world is a far poorer place for the majority of its inhabitants judging harshly of their neighbour.

Let us begin with ourselves. Let us especially be on guard over our hearts when we feel injured. We ought aim to be virtuous in heart, especially when it is difficult. Indeed we ought aim at heroic virtue, with the example of Jesus Christ constantly before us and the promise of his grace. If we feel inconvenienced, rebuffed, injured, not considered, let us resolve to pardon, to look on the attainments and virtues of our neighbour rather than on his defects. Above all, let us pray for those who injure us, knowing that this is the path pursued by Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Let us not judge and condemn our brother, for thus will God be merciful to us.

A Second Reflection: (1 Corinthians 9:16-19.22-27)

Our Spiritual Responsibilities I remember watching an interview with the great actor, Charlton Heston. He said that one of the biggest

problems now is that people do not take responsibility for their actions. He was saying that people need a greater sense of personal responsibility. What was it that drove St Paul to such lengths in his missionary life and work? By his own account (1 Cor. 9: 16-19.22-27) it was his *sense of responsibility*. It was not something he had chosen to do. Rather it was "*a responsibility that has been placed in my hands.*" His reward was to have fulfilled that responsibility by bringing the Gospel to others free of charge. Each one of us has a share in this same responsibility to bring Christ and his Gospel to others wherever we are, be it in family, work, parish, or wherever. If we fail to fulfill this responsibility, no-one else will be there in our place to do it. There will remain a lack at that point, and that lack will reverberate elsewhere and beyond.

Let us be alive to our spiritual responsibilities to ourselves, to our own sanctification, and to the sanctification of others. We take others with us towards heaven or towards hell. What happens to *them* is

to some extent *our responsibility*, just as what happens to *us* is our responsibility.



Saturday of the Twenty-third Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; Psalm 115; Luke 6:43-49

Jesus said, No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognised by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briers. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow

of his heart his mouth speaks. Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When the flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete. (Luke 6:43-49)

Rock Earthquakes at times hit strongly in places as divergent as California, Tennessee, New York, Japan and Brazil. Accordingly, more builders, architects and property owners look for ways to build earthquake resistant housing. Many construction companies specialize in building these types of structures, and while no design can totally prevent earthquake damage, certain building systems can lessen it. At the time I write this, the National Science Foundation (NSF) is the main United States government agency that supports research and

education in earthquake engineering. But all through history there has been the problem of constructing buildings that will resist earthquakes. People of the Inca civilization were masters of the polished dry-stone walls where blocks of stone were cut to fit together tightly without any mortar. It is estimated that the Incas were among the best stonemasons in human history, and archaeologists state that many junctions in their masonry were so perfect that even blades of grass could not fit between the stones. Peru is a seismic land, and for centuries the mortar free construction proved to be apparently more earthquake resistant than using mortar. The stones of the dry-stone walls built by the Incas could move slightly and resettle without the walls collapsing. Of course, it is not only earthquakes that destroy man's dwellings and meeting places. Tidal waves, torrents of rain and floods sweep them away too. Raging bush and forest fires destroy numerous homes in advanced countries such as Australia and parts of the United States. Let these examples introduce our point. Speaking of the man who has a solid foundation in life, our Lord uses the example of buildings that are constructed on a secure basis. *"He is like a man*

building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When the flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built.” Our Lord had been a carpenter-builder. Doubtlessly he had built homes, and would perhaps have laid them on a rock foundation – and the area of his home district of Nazareth was quite rocky. The point of his words in the Gospel today, though, is that our *life* must be based on a true and secure foundation.

If our life is not built on such a foundation, then just as buildings are very vulnerable to flood, wind, fire and earthquake, so will our life be exposed to the danger of complete collapse. A person may make his way to the top of his field, enjoying the favour of the most important persons, and commanding exceptional influence on his society. Despite appearances, though, he is not secure. When Henry VIII became king of England in 1509, the priest Thomas Wolsey (1471-1530) became the King's almoner. Wolsey's career prospered, and by 1514 he had become the controlling figure in virtually all matters of state and was

extremely powerful within the Church. He finally became Lord Chancellor, the King's chief adviser, and enjoyed great freedom. Within the Church he became Archbishop of York, the second most important see in England, and then was made a cardinal in 1515, giving him precedence over even the Archbishop of Canterbury. But it all came undone over the Great Matter of the King's marriage. Wolsey could not get the annulment, and he fell totally from favour, being finally arrested for treason and dying soon afterwards. His own private life as a priest was a disgrace. The point here is that his life was built on ambition, and so it was constructed on ground lacking any foundation. His fall was great and tragic. Seven years his junior, Thomas More succeeded Wolsey as Chancellor of England. His was an entirely different case. He was an eminent lawyer, a social philosopher, published author, and statesman. During his life he gained a reputation as a leading Renaissance humanist, a close friend of Erasmus, a bitter opponent of Martin Luther and of Tyndale's Bible. He had been Lord Chancellor for three years, when he resigned over the Great Matter of the divorce. His silence spoke

volumes. He would not allow for the divorce, nor for Henry's declaration that he was Head of Christ's Church. He went to the scaffold, a saint and a martyr of Christ and the Church. His life was built on rock, the rock that is Christ and his teaching. What a difference between the two – the one an unfaithful and worldly priest, the other a holy layman.

Christ tells us what is the true foundation of life, whatever life may bring in terms of temporal fortunes. Such fortunes come and go, but the foundation has to be true. That foundation is hearing the word of God as it comes to us from the mouth of Christ and the teaching of his representative the Church, and putting it into practice. Successful or unsuccessful in matters of this life as the case may be, the one necessary thing is that we strive to know what God wants and has taught, and then to put it into practice. Let that be our daily goal, and all will be well. As Saint Thomas More wrote in a letter to his daughter, *though I lose my head, I'll come to no harm.*

A Second Reflection: (1 Corinthians 10:14)

The First of the Ten Commandments St Paul tells us we "*must keep clear of idolatry*" (1 Cor. 10:14). This may seem obvious to us in our educated and civilized age. It refers to the very first of the ten commandments, on which all the others depend: *I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt not have strange gods besides me.* The point of St Paul's directive then follows. Those who are sacrificing to idols "*sacrifice to demons who are not gods. I have no desire to see you in communion with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons.*" That is to say, they are subjecting themselves to the influence of the devil and acknowledging other things in place of the one God. In our day and age it may be difficult to imagine educated people worshipping idols. But it is not impossible at all to "worship" (let us say) sources of influence other than the one God whom the

Church proclaims. One thinks of various forms of fortune telling, astrology, lucky charms, new age techniques, and even openly professed paganism such as the worship of earth goddesses. All of this, St Paul reminds us, opens us to the influence of Satan, and involves a substitution of something in the place of God. It is a serious sin, and it is going on in the modern world.

Let us devote ourselves to God alone, determining to make the sole object of our life to know, love and serve Christ his Son, and to renounce sin and anything that substitutes for God or that entices us away from Him.



Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 32:7 11.13-14; Psalm 50;
 1 Timothy 1: 12 17; Luke 15:1-32

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them he addressed this parable. "What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety nine in the desert and go after

the lost one until he finds it? And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbours and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous people who have no need of repentance. "Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it? And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbours and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost.' In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Then he said, "A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of

dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."' ' So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was

lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began. Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns, who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'" (Luke 15:1-32)

God our Father The Gospel of today tells the sad story of the son who was wasteful of all that his father had given him (Luke 15: 1-32),

and of its beautiful upshot in his restoration. Let us remember, though, that the purpose of the parable was to explain our Lord's own behaviour. The scribes and Pharisees had criticized him for welcoming sinners and eating with them. The all-holy God who hated sin, they assumed, would not do that. The parable is primarily an image of God, drawn by Jesus his Son. It shows God to be a loving and forgiving Father, the thought of whose love ought shape our lives. It is on this *merciful love* that we may constantly depend, provided we come humble and repentant, acknowledging God's goodness and our own sinful condition. In the first reading from the Old Testament book of Exodus, the all-holy God shows himself to Moses as angry at the sin of his people who were abandoning him for an idol they had made. God is the all-holy One, and his chosen people are incorrigibly sinful. At the start of the saga of the deliverance of the chosen people, Moses had heard the divine voice saying to him from the Burning Bush, "*Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground*" (Ex.3:5). Moses was a sinner too, and so could not come near the all-holy God. Throughout the Old

Testament there is a progressive revelation of what this holy God is like. His holiness is gradually revealed to be a merciful love. He is a father and a husband to his wayward people. In the process of this revelation of *God*, the Scriptures reveal what *man* is like. The people of God are sinful, incorrigibly sinful. Still, God promises to pour out his Holy Spirit to change the hearts of his children and unite them to himself. This was the promise, and it was fulfilled by our Lord's sacrifice on the Cross. Because of his death on the Cross, God has given us his Spirit and his grace enabling us to repent and live for him.

We who are like the prodigal son are able to return, precisely because God is like the father of the prodigal son. Like the sinners and the publicans whom our Lord welcomed and with whom he dined, we too can feel confident in the love of God our Father for us. Our Lord reveals God to be a wonderful father. Now, when this is said of God, we ought not understand it primarily in terms of earthly fathers, although if one has a good earthly father that can help. Rather, we learn of the fatherhood of God from *Jesus*. We must enter into union with

our Lord, and by his grace and teaching learn from *him* what *his* heavenly Father, who is now *our* God and Father, is like. Eternal life involves a personal knowledge of God our Father – "*Eternal life is this,*" our Lord said at the Last Supper, "*to know you, God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*" It is Jesus Christ who can and will give us a personal knowledge of the Father, because God is *his* own natural Father. "*No one can come to the Father except through me*", our Lord said. "*No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.*" Jesus called himself our brother. "*Go and tell the brothers,*" he said to Mary Magdalen when he rose from the dead, "*that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.*" Our whole life should be lived on the basis of a constant awareness of what Jesus our God and Brother has revealed – that the great and infinite God is our Father, and that we are his beloved children. I am God's adopted child! This means that I can approach God with childlike confidence, and live constantly in his presence. Yet I must be humble, contrite, and reverent, as a child who knows he is profoundly loved yet who knows also that he so often offends his great,

revered, loving and all-perfect Father. He is a Father who is loving and forgiving, and yet holy and non-accepting of sin. He will always say to us what our Lord said to the sinful woman, *go now, and do not sin again.*

Let us make constant use of the Lord's Prayer in our daily life, but not just routinely. It ought be the principal prayer of our daily life, the prayer that teaches us to call God our Father, and to recognise that we are his children. It is the prayer that will help us to become the children he wants us to be, holy, humble, repentant, determined to be like our loving Father in all things.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2777 2785

(Our Father Who Art in Heaven)

A Second Reflection: Luke 15:1-32

Sin Our Gospel today tells us about sin, but the starting point of the narrative is God's love. "*The tax collectors and the sinners were all seeking the company of Jesus to hear what he had to say, and the*

Pharisees and the scribes complained.” They were complaining, not about the sinners, but about Jesus - about *"this man"* who *"welcomes sinners and eats with them"* (Luke 15:1-32). Jesus told the parable to show the scribes and Pharisees that what he was doing is what God does. God is a father, overflowing with indulgence. *“A man had two sons. The younger said to the father, ‘Father, let me have the share of the estate that would come to me.’”* And so *“the father divided the property between them.”* God has given us life, family, so many opportunities and new starts. Above all he has given us His own Son, and with His Son he has given us the opportunity of an eternity with Him forever. When the sinful son at last came home, his father, seeing him a long way off, ran to embrace him. Then when his son said, *"Father, I have sinned against God and against you,"* the celebrations began. The father was always ready to forgive, had the wayward son only returned. So it is with our heavenly Father. That revelation of God's love is the starting point for what the parable reveals of the enormity of sin. Sin ruined the younger son, and were it not for his repentance and return to his loving father, he would have been lost. In

God's sight, sin is the greatest of tragedies. It was the sin of our first parents which spoilt God's creative work, and it was the sin of mankind which led God to send his Son for love of man. Precisely because God loves the sinner and hates the sin, he seeks out sinful man unremittingly. It is because he sees the enormity of sin that God took such great steps to take it away. Our Lord tells us that there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine virtuous men who have no need of repentance. When the wayward son returned, the celebrations began, and there was more rejoicing over him than there was for the older son who had never left his father's presence. He had been rescued from the enormity of sin.

The tax collectors and sinners were seeking the company of sinners in order to hear what Jesus had to say. While Christ wished to tell them that God loves them and wants them to turn away from their sins, still, they had to repent. He told this to *all* – not only to the tax collectors and sinners, but to the scribes and Pharisees too. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent! This message of repentance is what

our Lord began his public ministry with, and it is his message for every generation. The danger is that we can settle into a comfortable acceptance of our sins, especially our venial sins. We can persist in committing venial sins, rarely confessing them, rarely being sorry for them and rarely trying to root them out of our lives. The danger is that we become complacent about venial sin. Of course, it is a terrible thing to be living in mortal sin. If a person commits a mortal sin whether of thought, word or deed, it is imperative that he be like the prodigal son, and confess the sin and seek forgiveness, above all in the holy Sacrament of Penance. But there is also the danger of taking a casual attitude towards venial sin, whether of thought or word or deed. We can contentedly remain in our sins, thinking that they do not matter, and gradually coming to think that we are not really sinners anyway. It is through deliberate and unrepented venial sin that sin can grow in our lives, that we can lose the sense of sin. It is through venial sin that the way can be prepared for mortal sin. What is notable about the Pharisees is that they did not think of themselves as sinners. They had lost the sense of sin. Let us strive to please God by turning away from venial

sin every day. It would be a good strategy to concentrate on a persistent venial sin for, say, six or twelve months till it has been uprooted. We should be making frequent use of the Sacrament of Penance to be reconciled to God after the manner of the prodigal son, and to have daily venial sin cleansed from our hearts. Whenever we turn away from sin, including deliberate venial sin, we bring joy to God and to those who are with God in heaven. *"I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine virtuous men who have no need of repentance."*

When we do not care about venial sin, we are likely to count ourselves among the ninety-nine virtuous men who have no need of repentance. I do not commit many sins! We do, but we do not think they are important, and as a result we become scarcely conscious of their presence in our lives. We ought be working continually on developing a sense of sin, a growing spirit of repentance, and praying for this as a grace of the Holy Spirit. We ought be more and more sorry for our sins, striving through acts of contrition and regular Confession

to recognise them, renounce them, and with God's grace resolving to live a holy life as Christ's friend.

Monday of the Twenty-fourth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 11:17-26.33; Psalm 39; Luke 7:1-10

When Jesus had finished all his words to the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave who was ill and about to die, and he was valuable to him. When he heard about Jesus, he sent

elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and save the life of his slave. They approached Jesus and strongly urged him to come, saying, "He deserves to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation and he built the synagogue for us." And Jesus went with them, but when he was only a short distance from the house, the centurion sent friends to tell him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof. Therefore, I did not consider myself worthy to come to you; but say the word and let my servant be healed. For I too am a person subject to authority, with soldiers subject to me. And I say to one, Go, and he goes; and to another, Come here, and he comes; and to my slave, Do this, and he does it." When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him and, turning, said to the crowd following him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." When the messengers returned to the house, they found the slave in good health. (Luke 7:1-10)

Mercy It is common for man across the ages to appeal to the gods (or to God) for help in meeting their needs. The Greek shrine of Delphi

was famous for many centuries, and hosted large numbers of pilgrims and devotees who came to lodge their petitions. These requests were of numerous kinds, and often they were requests for sheer guidance. Ought we go to war – meaning, will war bring success for us? The oracle was notoriously ambiguous, satisfying any eventuality, but it kept up business for a very long time indeed. It was all based on the common religious instinct that there were higher powers to be accessed through recognizable mediators, and that these powers could be friendly to man. There was the felt need, and there was the conviction that the powers above could be of great help if they were induced to be on side, for they had the *power*. Broadly speaking, there was not much of a moral dimension to this – that is to say, the moral condition of the petitioner was not much of an issue. Nor was the moral condition of the deity at issue, as long as he or she had the relevant *power* and friendly disposition. If you were embarking on a sea voyage, Neptune would be the god to try to get interested. And so it has been for the generality of mankind – with this proviso, that in Revealed Religion the one God insisted on right moral living because

he himself was utterly moral and holy. *Be holy, for I am holy* – he demanded. This being granted, the pattern remained that man appealed to the One above for aid, for he had the *power*. Throughout the Old Testament, Yahweh God was the Father and Protector of his people, for he alone was the Mighty One and without him the people would fall. So the scene we have in our Gospel today was all of a piece with this, the interesting detail being that we have a *centurion* who approaches Jesus for aid in his need. The Jews who interceded on his behalf did not say he was one of us – he clearly was not. He was not a proselyte to the Jewish religion, but he was friendly to it and assisted the religious life of the Jews of Capernaum (for that is where the centurion resided, we read). He was a good man, meaning that he was a moral man and he recognized in Jesus a most moral person. He himself paled before the moral grandeur of Jesus, such that he was not worthy to approach him. But he believed in Jesus' *power and mercy*.

For one outside Revealed Religion, this was remarkable and was seen as such by Jesus himself. *When Jesus heard this he was amazed at*

him and, turning, said to the crowd following him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." It is not absolutely clear just why the centurion thought himself not to be worthy to meet Jesus, but presumably it was because of his recognition (from close reports, for it seems that both he and Jesus resided in Capernaum) of Christ's high holiness. By implication, he would have been conscious of his own sinfulness, one presumes. This is an impressive combination, and one lacking in the religious leaders of the nation who quickly became Jesus' enemies. They were not aware of sin in themselves, and were not in awe of the holiness of Jesus. The non-Jewish centurion's attitude was not unlike that of Simon Peter early on, who said to our Lord "*Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man*". Nor was it altogether unlike what St John the Baptist said to our Lord: *It is I who should be baptized by you, and you come to me for baptism?* The common element here seems to have been a real sense of sin, of what was operating in the prayer of the Publican praying in the Temple in our Lord's famous parable: *My God, have mercy on me, a sinner!* The centurion was approaching our Lord, with something like a personal *sense of sin*, to

ask for an exercise of his *merciful power*. The Publican in the Temple was also asking God for an exercise of his mercy, mercy for his sins. The centurion was asking for an exercise of the divine mercy, mercy for his sick servant. That centurion was, by his faith, implicitly *on the way* to what our Lord most desired to give, the merciful pardon of sins and a share in the life of holiness. I suggest that it is this which we ought especially advert to. Let the action of the centurion remind us of what Jesus Christ came to reveal and to bestow. He came to reveal the all-powerful mercy of God for man's deepest and most destructive need, which is sin. As St Paul writes, sin entered the world through one man and with sin came death, and death has spread through the whole human race. The supreme problem and challenge, far beyond man or the world to overcome, was the presence and elimination of sin. How was it to be taken away? That was the real question before the universe. Only God could do it, and he had the boundless power and the boundless love and mercy to bring it about. All this was embodied and available in the wonderful divine person of the man Jesus Christ.

To a point, let that centurion represent each of us. Let us approach Jesus Christ, true God and true man, conscious of our sins and failings and our need to be pardoned of them and endowed with the life of the all-holy God. Jesus Christ our Redeemer and God offers this to us, for he is the revelation of the divine mercy. We must have a profound awareness of our true moral condition and need, and a high confidence in the loving mercy of the most holy Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit. Cardinal Newman, now beatified, wrote in the notes of one of his Catholic sermons that the prayer of the Publican in the Temple expressed the essence of true religion. That prayer, which we ought oft repeat, was, *God, be merciful to me a sinner!* Let that prayer become habitual, with our eyes above all on the holy and kind face of God. And what is God's face like? The face of God is Jesus Christ. He is the image of the unseen God, and in seeing him we see the Father.

A Second Reflection: (1 Corinthians 11:17-26.33)

The Holy Eucharist Saint Paul explicitly tells us that the risen Jesus himself told him about the institution of the Eucharist. "*For this*

is what I received from the Lord, and in turn passed on to you: that on the night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread..." (1 Cor. 11: 17-26). St Paul was a contemporary of our Lord, and quite possibly he had heard of him during his public ministry and perhaps too at the time of his passion and death. But it was only the heavenly, risen Jesus who had spoken to him, and he spoke to him on different occasions. One of the many things he told St Paul was about the Eucharist, its institution and its meaning. At the end of the passage referred to above, St Paul gives the meaning of the Eucharist. He says that "*Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death.*" Every time the Eucharist is celebrated, our Lord's death is made present, and proclaimed sacramentally. Being made present, we are present sacramentally at Calvary, and, united with Christ at Calvary, we become equipped in our turn to proclaim his death in our everyday life.

Let us put the Eucharist at the centre of our lives, and thus allow the death of Jesus to be proclaimed in us, and together with that, the power of his resurrection in living a life of holiness.



Tuesday of the Twenty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinth. 12:12-14.27-31; Psalm. 99; Luke 7:11-17

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out — the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying

him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people." This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. (Luke 7:11-17)

Christ If one were to attempt to identify the most influential person in human history, what might one say? Well, in his book *Portrait of Socrates* (Oxford at the Clarendon, 1938, reprints up to 1966), Sir R. W. Livingstone has this to say at the beginning of his Preface. "*It would be strange to know nothing of Shakespeare or of Napoleon; but it is quite as strange to know nothing of Socrates, for morally and intellectually he is one of the most remarkable figures in history, and he has had a deeper influence on western civilization than any one except Jesus Christ.*" At the end of the same page (v), he observes that in the words and deeds of certain persons (such as Socrates) a step forward is taken and "*the world is changed for ever. Such moments in history are*

the birth of Christ, and those centuries between 600 and 400 B.C. ...”

At the end of his stellar life, while imprisoned on the island of St Helena, Napoleon Bonaparte had something to say of the influence of Jesus Christ. One day in a conversation with Montholon, he put this question to him: “*Who was Jesus Christ?*” Montholon having declined to answer, Napoleon (among other things) said: “*Christ alone across the chasm of eighteen centuries makes a demand which is beyond all others difficult to satisfy. He asks for the human heart. He will have it entirely to Himself. He demands it unconditionally, and forthwith His demand is granted. Wonderful! In defiance of time and space, the soul of man with all its powers and faculties becomes an annexation to the empire of Christ. This phenomenon is unaccountable; it is altogether beyond the scope of man’s creative powers.*” The unique character of this influence and its effect on so many lives convinced Bonaparte that Jesus Christ was divine. I remember being part of a short tour of parts of Jerusalem and the leader was Jewish. He passingly referred to the “incredible influence” on history of Jesus Christ – though of course he did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, let alone divine. It is plain

to many that in Jesus of Nazareth there was a great man of religion – “a great prophet” if one wishes to use the word, through whom “God has visited his people.” But, whatever about Napoleon, that is as far as many would go. Our Gospel scene today (Luke 7:11-17) in which many witness the striking event of the raising of the dead young man by Christ, may be seen as a template of this. A “great prophet has risen among us”.

Yes, of course he was a “great prophet”. It had been a long time since the last of the recognized prophets, and then suddenly two appeared – the one being John the Baptist in (and from) Judea, who then designated Jesus as the Messiah, One much greater than himself. Soon after this John was arrested for his intrepid witness, and Jesus took the stage back in Galilee. It was not unlike Elijah being followed by Elisha who had asked for a double portion of his spirit. But Jesus outclassed them all and “no-one spoke as this man speaks”. His amazing works on behalf of God and his Kingdom were unparalleled in their power and faultless goodness. The country was

rife with talk of him – Herod the tetrarch heard of him and wanted to set eyes on him. Pilate’s wife may also have heard of him, for she had had a bad night over the thought of him as Christ approached his trial. Christ’s greatness was evident even if the *extent* of it was not. When Pilate was told by the hostile Jews that Jesus had claimed to be the Son of God (and so ought to die), he was afraid. I doubt that this was simply a kind of panic that he was finding himself in tricky religious controversy in which he could be accused of violating the religious sensibilities of an occupied people. After all, the charge had been of a form of political sedition: the Jewish religious leaders said that Jesus had claimed to be a “king”. If Pilate released him, he was no friend of Caesar. No – I suspect that the superstitious Pilate had a sudden intimation that Jesus was much more than appearances suggested. He feared what he himself was doing, if this obviously innocent man was some kind of “son of God”. There was something altogether superior and special about him, even unique. But then the poor pathetic Pilate sank into his cynical skepticism and overwhelming self-concern. He succumbed to the demands of the mob thinking to

save his skin. But I suspect he had a fleeting glimmer of the greatness of the Man before him. It may be viewed as a harbinger of the eventual recognition by the Roman Empire three centuries later. In any case, this “great prophet” who had arisen among the chosen people was far greater than they imagined. This great man was *God*, no less. He was not the Father, but he was God just as much as the Father was. He was the *Son*, God the Son made truly man. He, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, had become one of us and had taken upon himself the burden of the sin of all mankind. His work was to atone for it all by his death.

The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. Let us make the emphatic resolution not to slip into thinking of Jesus of Nazareth as simply “a great prophet”, in and through whom “God has come to help his

people.” This is one of the most obvious dangers in respect to the person of Jesus Christ. The danger is to reduce Jesus Christ to the level of one of the great prophets who have appeared among men. To rest at this is nothing to the purpose. When Christ asked his disciples (in Matthew 16) who men thought him to be, that was the answer he received. But no. He is far, far more than this. He is the Messiah, and, as Simon Peter added, the Son of the living God. But to perceive this requires a special grace from the Father – and this is what the Christian has been granted. Treasure it, then!



Wednesday of the Twenty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36: 18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Psalm 32; Luke 7:31-35

Jesus said, To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling out to each other: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.' For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and

you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by all her children. (Luke 7:31-35)

Children of Wisdom For some centuries now, perhaps the main focus of the Anglo-Saxon philosophical world has been epistemology, which is to say the philosophical study of knowledge and justified belief. What is it to *know* something to be the case, and how is this to be *justified*? It is clear that epistemology remains a vigorous area of inquiry at the heart of philosophy. Why is this so? There would be numerous reasons, but I suspect that a principal one has been the mere fact, in Western culture and society, of vast *disagreement* among so many on fundamental matters. When society is agreed that a number of fundamental things are true, then one would think that there is little incentive to ask if the human mind can know the truth, and what justifies man in thinking he has the truth. But when there are profound cleavages in opinion in very important matters (such as that there is a good, infinite God, or that Jesus is God and that he founded his Church,

and that certain things are morally obligatory), then the questions arise, who is wrong? Is there a truth to be attained anyway? What enables the apprehension of the truth? This, then, is the question being raised: What are the factors involved in the attainment of the truth? This is fundamental for religion, for if a religion is not perceived as *true*, then of what use is it? I say this advisedly, because for some two centuries now the widespread question is, not is it true, but is it of *use*? Will it *work* to the purpose? Will this or that religion or way of life get me what I want? The objective truth of matters religious and moral is set aside as essentially controversial and in effect unresolvable, while its utility is able to be discussed and agreed on. What is important is that I and others be “happy”. Well then, let this serve to introduce our Gospel today (Luke 7:31-35), in which our Lord laments that whatever God tried in his efforts to bring the people of “this generation” to right conviction failed. On the one hand “the flute was played, and you did not dance”. On the other hand, “we sang a dirge, and you did not cry”. Our Lord was using a game among children to make his point that nothing converted the people to a right perception of the truth of his

Chosen One, Jesus. *John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'*

The question this raises in our minds is, is there a special factor which is necessary to attain the truth? Yes, there is – what is particularly decisive is a right lived *disposition*. This brings us to our Lord's conclusion: *But wisdom is proved right by all her children*. The “wisdom” to which our Lord refers is the mind of God expressed in his varied works and words – as manifested in his Revelation. The Old Testament has much to say about the divine “wisdom” and its immense benefit to man. This “wisdom” is expressed in the Scriptures, and it is personified in the person of Jesus himself. He is the “wisdom” of God, the Logos, the Word. He who is the “wisdom” of God was with God in the beginning. All things were made through him and he, the Logos who was the light and life of men, was coming into the world. We read in the first chapter of John's Gospel that “He was in the world, and the

world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own but his own did not receive him” (1: 10-11). Some did, though – it is they who were the “children” of “wisdom”. Those who were of God, those who accepted the “wisdom” of God and who (according to their lights) *chose to live according to it*, recognized Jesus and received him. It is not hard to see that in almost any sphere of human knowledge a *disposition* of openness to the subject is needed if there is to be a true apprehension of it. If you are not interested in painting and have little desire to paint, even though you may have a native talent for it you will never be a truly good painter. You are not sufficiently *disposed* to focus your abilities sufficiently on the ongoing work that will be needed. There has to be an interest, a readiness, a desire, otherwise the mind will be closed and one’s powers for the task will not be aroused and applied. The same goes for the things of God. But it has to be emphasized that more is needed than mere interest – the interest has to have been effective and operating. In matters moral and religious, the apprehension of the truth requires a *sincerity* of conscience shown in one’s *actions*. One may be very mistaken as to the truth up to and prior

to grasping the truth of God, but sincerity of conscience will count greatly in its apprehension. The *apprehension* of religious and moral truth generally requires, *in some sense*, a living of the truth according to one's lights. In this sense, it is the "children of wisdom" who are able to "prove right", or vindicate, the truth of wisdom.

All this is to say that the way to attain the light is to live according to the light one has been given. In this way one becomes a "child" of "wisdom", and *thus* disposed for the truth. When St Paul was traveling along the road to Damascus he intended to stamp out the error of the fledgling Christian creed. He was blind to its truth. But he was sincerely acting according to his mistaken conscience and living a truly upright religious life as he understood the Law of God to require. He was living sincerely according to his lights, and in this sense was well prepared for the Light when it suddenly came. He had been, though quite mistaken, a "child of wisdom". When Christ spoke to him he responded totally and became the foremost champion of "wisdom", and able to vindicate and prove its truth. Let us then resolve

to be true children of the wisdom of God. If we live according to the “wisdom” that has been granted us, still more light will be granted.

Thursday of the Twenty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Psalm 117; Luke 7:36-50

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the

Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is- that she is a sinner. Jesus answered him, Simon, I have something to tell you. Tell me, teacher, he said. Two men owed money to a certain money lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more? Simon replied, I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled. You have judged correctly, Jesus said. Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her

many sins have been forgiven- for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little. Then Jesus said to her, Your sins are forgiven. The other guests began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins? Jesus said to the woman, Your faith has saved you; go in peace. (Luke 7:36-50)

He went everywhere There is a detail in our Gospel passage today which is quite central to the event being narrated, but which is probably seldom considered. It is the event described in the very first sentence. "*Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at table.*" Our Lord was invited, by one of the class from which his most hostile critics were drawn, to come and dine with him. It shows, incidentally, that there were varying degrees of criticism of our Lord among the Pharisees. Not all were implacably hostile. Nicodemus, one of them, was actually a disciple. It also shows that despite their hostility towards him, our Lord's manner towards the Pharisees was such as in no way to deter them from inviting him to partake of their hospitality. He was

forbearing, forgiving and welcoming towards them, despite their attitudes and actions. For instance, in the case before us, our Lord entered the house for the meal, and – as we learn from his ensuing discourse – he was not accorded the courtesies usual for an esteemed guest. But he said nothing of that until the moment when mention of it served to illustrate his teaching which honoured the woman who had sought forgiveness. The principal point here is that our Lord was there in that fairly lavish and socially important setting. He did not shun what were, in the sight of God, somewhat dubious religious settings. We see elsewhere that our Lord condemned, in language characteristic of the most forthright prophets right up to John the Baptist, the spiritual state and the practices of the Pharisees. But he did not hesitate to associate with them, if good could be done. Similarly, he did not hesitate to associate with sinners and publicans, if good could be done. His entire manner showed a welcome to all — and the fact that a woman who was a notorious sinner felt free to come to him boldly before the very Pharisees, and display open repentance before him, illustrates this. Our Lord went anywhere, met anyone, and showed

himself a friend to all, if he could gain all. He spoke with dignity and yet respect to Pilate, a pagan, as he did with the good thief, a repentant believer, as he hung dying on the Cross. Christ is God-with-us, wherever we might be. God became thoroughly incarnate in order to reveal the divine mercy.

This feature of Christ's ready presence among men of all kinds is highlighted when we think of his great Precursor whose mission was to point to him, and to be far surpassed by him. John the Baptist was great before God. Our Lord indicated that he was peerless. Now, can we imagine John the Baptist reclining at table with the Pharisees, in something of a feast? Can we imagine, for that matter, his being invited by them to do so? Can we imagine him eating and drinking with publicans and sinners? It is difficult even to imagine him participating in an event such as the wedding feast of Cana. He was a renowned ascetic, and lived in the wilderness – even, it seems, from his early adulthood, perhaps even from his youth. He did not associate with the ordinary life of various classes of persons. His holiness and prophetic

charism drew them from their towns to where he was in the wilderness. But our Lord, far holier than John (as John himself explicitly acknowledged), went out to where the people were. During his years at Nazareth he mixed and lived as an ordinary townsman would do. During his public ministry he had nowhere, he said to one, to lay his head – but he readily associated with all, in order to win all. His mission was to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, be they the publicans and sinners, or be they the scribes and the Pharisees. Now, does this not say something to the follower of Jesus Christ? Just before he ascended into heaven, Christ charged his disciples to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations. Whatever be their customs and culture, whatever be their strengths and weaknesses, whatever be their illusions, delusions, or points of clarity, his disciples were to go to them, talk with them, engage them, befriend them, and in doing so bring Christ to them. Our Lord promised that he would be with them to the end of the age. So where they went, he would be there. That is the mission of the Christian, to bring Jesus Christ to the whole world. It is

especially the lay Christian who does this, because the lay Christian's home is the world.

Let the follower of Jesus Christ grow every day in the knowledge and love of his Lord. This is his foremost calling. He must strive to be a great friend of Jesus Christ. But precisely as a friend of Jesus Christ, he has the mission in life of bringing Jesus Christ to every nook and cranny of the human scene. In Christ man has every heavenly blessing, so Jesus Christ must be brought to every man and woman. Our Lord set the example by dining in the house of the Pharisee, and doing much else like this besides. Let us go to man wherever he is, whenever it is possible, and by this means bring him into contact with his God and Redeemer, Jesus Christ our Lord.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 7:36-50)

The Sense of Sin Consider the immense sensitivity of our Lord, accepting serenely the manifestation of sorrow for sin of the woman with a bad reputation. (Luke 7: 36-50). He showed great love for any

repentant sinner, and held her up as an example to those who prided themselves on being virtuous. It has been pointed out by various popes that a distinguishing feature of the modern age — indeed, according to Pope Pius XII, the very sin of the modern age — is the lack of a sense of sin. This lack of a sense of sin is not pleasing to our Lord, as we see from his rebuke of the Pharisee. God would want us to take special note of each example in Scripture of the repentant sinner, as having a special relevance to us. So what must we do? We should ask God for a sense of our sinfulness, a knowledge of our sins, and a deep faith in his love for the repentant sinner.

This is the grace we ought pray for, and then bring to others. Then we must try to grow in this virtue by the repeated practice of it: by the daily examination of conscience and acts of contrition for sin, and frequent Confession, approached with a lively faith.



Friday of the Twenty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Psalm 16; Luke 8:1-3

After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household;

Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. (Luke 8:1-3)

They Served Him We read in Acts 18:3 that when St Paul came to Corinth he stayed with the Jew Aquila, because they were both tentmakers by trade. In 1 Corinthians 9: 12, Paul states in his letter to the Corinthians that, though by the decree of Christ himself (9:14) he had the right to be supported by those he served in his ministry, he did not exercise this right. He supported himself by his tentmaker trade. Clearly, though, he did not *always* do this, because we read in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (11:8) that he "*robbed other churches, taking wages of them, to do you service.*" Again, in his Letter to the Philippians he praises them, for they were the only church that had ever given to his work. And they had given "*once and again*"(4:15-16). So whatever of Paul's general policy, he did at times receive support. Now, while Paul was a tentmaker by trade, our Lord was a carpenter-builder. While many would need tents, one would think that all needed houses and working implements. His may have been a trade

handed down over several generations of Joseph's ancestors, being finally passed to Jesus himself. It probably involved both wood and rock work and a great deal of practical skill. But Christ abandoned it all once his public ministry began. He did *not* do what Paul did – once into his ministry, he did not support himself by his trade. He was entirely given over to his heavenly Father and to his mission to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and depended just on whatever came to hand. Moreover, though the disciples had their trades (the principal ones among them were fishermen) he directed them to depend on the support of those they served in their ministry, "*for the labourer deserves his keep*" (Matthew 10: 10). In fact, this is re-iterated by St Paul himself in his directions to Timothy (1 Timothy 5: 18). So then, how did our Lord live during his ministry? Let this question serve as an introduction to the women mentioned by name in our Gospel today. They accompanied the apostolic band, with Jesus in its midst and at its head, as it went from town and village proclaiming the Kingdom of God. They *supported* our Lord and the Twelve *from their means*. So much was this the case that each of the Synoptic Gospels

mentions the fact. Humanly speaking, they enabled our Lord to be free to do what he was doing.

Our passage is from Luke. We read in St Mark, which is generally thought to be the Gospel as preached by Peter, that when Christ was dying on the Cross, there were "*women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and Jose, and Salome, who, when he was in Galilee, followed him and ministered to him*" (15:40). So while Luke tells us that there were "*Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others*" helping in this way, Mark adds to the list "*Mary the mother of James the younger and Jose, and Salome*" (Mark). Matthew also mentions these women as having ministered to him in Galilee – and he adds "*the mother of the sons of Zebedee*" (27:55). There were "*others*." They vigorously assisted in the great operation, and our Lord and the disciples must have realized their importance for the work. They must have felt encouraged, for

they kept it up. We remember the Gospel text that at one point our Lord and the disciples had no time even to eat. Their work was intense and all-consuming. Now, what did the women gain by their involvement? They gained a direct association with Jesus Christ. They were with him, living in his presence and participating actively in his redemptive work. Their love for him grew and they were privileged to receive his gaze of loving appreciation. They were not called to do what the apostles were doing, but their work may be said to be, in its own way, just as necessary. There is an image given by one modern saint that illustrates the necessity of each and every person in the plan of God. He refers to the donkey that goes round and round all day, pulling the large weight. That weight keeps the water running for the village. The village could not get on without that humdrum action of the donkey. However humdrum be our calling in life, in it we have the opportunity to serve Jesus Christ directly and live in his love. There is a full place for all. Martha, Mary and Lazarus, for example, were not among the evangelizing troop, but were dear friends of Jesus Christ.

The one thing necessary for us, then, is the love and service of Jesus Christ. We are called to love him with all our mind, heart, soul and strength, and to love our neighbour as he has loved us. Each of us has our own particular calling in life, and the essence of this calling is the service of Christ and the promotion of his kingdom – which consists precisely in union with him. We are all part of the band, but fulfilling our roles in different ways. Let us be pure in our intention, every day doing all for the greater glory of God alone.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 8:1-3)

Accompanying the Master Consider the mention Luke makes of those with Christ and the Twelve: "*certain women, who had been cured of evil spirits and ailments ... and several others who provided for them out of their own resources.*" This reminds us that we all have a place in assisting the Master who continues in the Church and at her head to make his way everywhere proclaiming the Gospel. Every member, whatever be his or her background, whatever be his or her history of gifts from the Lord, has the honour and the privilege of playing a daily

part in the great work of the Master. But to enter into this we have to be *living a life of faith*, for the simple reason that our Lord is no longer visible among us. We also have to be *generous*, being prepared to go beyond and well beyond what many would regard as the limit of our ordinary duties. St Luke said the women assisted and provided for them out of their own resources – it was beyond their ordinary duty, but they did it gladly because they *loved* the Master.

So too with each of us.



Saturday of the Twenty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 15:35-37.42-49; Psalm 55; Luke 8:4-15

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and

choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown. When he said this, he called out, He who has ears to hear, let him hear. His disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, 'though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.' This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. (Luke 8:4-15)

Good Soil The English novel reached its height in the nineteenth century. There were great novelists, and minor ones. One of the minor novelists was John Henry Newman, beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in September 2010. He wrote two novels, and even though they would not be classed with the best of the century, for those who appreciate Newman's thought as a great theologian and philosopher of religious faith, they are novels that attract repeated readings. The second novel, *Callista*, has the conversion of Callista, a pagan Greek woman in mid-third century Africa, for its theme. Callista passed from being a dissatisfied pagan to a glorious end as a Christian martyr. Callista's journey of faith was not simply an intellectual examination of the evidence for the truth of Christ and the Church. As Newman narrates it, many factors were involved, and not least was the unfolding in her of basic instinctive perceptions prior to the acceptance of a creed. Callista had first principles that made her dissatisfied with the prevailing paganism. She attracted the love and fascination of the young Agellius, a Catholic, who was convinced that there was in her something that was leading her to Catholicism. Their religious beliefs differed, of course –

for the simple reason that Callista was not a Christian. Nevertheless, as Newman writes, *'He recurred to the pleasant imagination that Callista would certainly become a Christian, and dwelt pertinaciously upon it. He could not tell on what it was founded; he knew enough of his religion not to mean that she was too good to be a heathen; so it was to be supposed he meant that he discerned what he hoped were traces of some supernatural influence operating upon her mind. He had a perception which he could not justify by argument, that there was in Callista a promise of something higher than anything she yet was. He felt a strange sympathy with her, which certainly, unless he utterly deceived himself, was not based on anything merely natural or human – a sympathy the more remarkable from the contrariety which existed between them in matters of religious belief'* (p.62, Universe Books).

The advance towards the acceptance of Christ and his teaching was not dependent simply on intellectual capacity. It was not dependent on the ability to think logically. Callista had a *right disposition*. Her first principles, her basic perceptions and views, were

such as to lead her to the faith – granted the other helps that were also needed, such as correct instruction and the example of notable Christians such as St Cyprian. She also needed the aid of grace. But Callista was a *good person*, and her basic outlook rendered her open to Christian influences. Whereas the other pagan personages immediately around her – her brother Aristo, Juba the brother of Agellius, their uncle Jucundus, and say, the philosopher Polemo – were all such as to be impervious to Christian witness and to the word of Christ. I introduce these literary characters to illustrate our Lord's point in the parable of today's Gospel (Luke 8: 4 15). Our Lord is speaking to a large crowd of people who had come to him from "each city." He could see that many did not have it in them to receive his message, so he told a parable of the sower going out to sow his seed – and left it at that. As he later explained, he was the sower, and the seed was the word of God that he preached. In the case of many it had no effect. They did not believe. In the case of some, it bore a harvest. Was it that those who bore the harvest were more intelligent, more logical, more capable in mental attainments? No, that is not said. They were all part of the

crowd. The difference in the results seems to be due to *basic dispositions*. In one lot of persons the word does not penetrate at all, and is left on the surface. It is spirited away from them by the devil. Another lot of persons have no root. They are superficial. Another lot have all their interests in life elsewhere: "*they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures.*" Others are indeed good soil. Callista was good soil. She struggled with elements of the Christian religion and was repelled by what she thought to be the inconstancy of Christians, but she had it in her to be a Christian. The witch Gurta sensed this, as did the Catholic, Agellius. So did St Cyprian. When the crisis of deadly persecution came, Callista, aided by grace and baptized by St Cyprian, declared herself a Christian.

The trouble is that many of our starting points are beyond our explicit awareness. Very often we do not know what our first principles are. We are borne along by our basic, implicit and hidden views, and it is not easy to change them, if change is needed. We must resort to divine grace. Agellius had the sense that Callista was being fashioned

by grace, prior to her adoption of the Christian creed. Let us ask God to give us the right starting points, the right foundations, the right direction, a right heart. We need to be good soil. Let us put our shoulder to the wheel of personal sanctification, relying on grace, asking God for it, and striving every day to be faithful to it. Then the harvest will come.



Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Dn 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 112; 1 Tim. 2:1-8; Luke 16:1-13

Jesus said to his disciples, "A rich man had a steward who was reported to him for squandering his property. He summoned him and said, 'What is this I hear about you? Prepare a full account of your stewardship, because you can no longer be my steward.' The steward

said to himself, 'What shall I do, now that my master is taking the position of steward away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do so that, when I am removed from the stewardship, they may welcome me into their homes.' He called in his master's debtors one by one. To the first he said, 'How much do you owe my master?' He replied, 'One hundred measures of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note. Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.' Then to another the steward said, 'And you, how much do you owe?' He replied, 'One hundred kors of wheat.' The steward said to him, 'Here is your promissory note; write one for eighty.' And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently. "For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones. If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth,

who will trust you with true wealth? If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is yours? No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and mammon.” (Luke 16:1-13)

God or Money Our Lord tell us in today's Gospel that we cannot have it both ways. *"You cannot be the slave both of God and of money."* This implies that money can become a god. One often gets the impression that much of economic and social life is driven by those who are slaves of money. A slave of money cannot, our Lord tells us, be a servant of God for such a person serves another god. St Paul describes greed as worshipping a false god (Col 3:5), and as the root of all evil (1 Tim 6:10). Further, a slave of money will disregard the one in need, and there is a warning from the prophet Amos on God's behalf: *"Never will I forget a single thing you have done"* (Amos 8: 4 7). A secular society relegates God to the private sphere as a mere opinion. But the Church teaches that it is the vocation of the lay

Catholic Christian to bring God and what He has revealed directly to bear on society, on the world of work and on economic activity. In these social spheres we are to be slaves of God, and not of money. Only if this is so will economic prosperity bring true happiness and success to man. Christian morality as Christ revealed it will be found to be a powerful key to the true economic and social flourishing of the life of peoples. But for this to happen, what Christ has revealed must be known. This is why it is important to be aware of the Church's social teaching. A great need of the modern day is that the lay Catholic try to know what the Church teaches on the matter of economic and social progress, and then endeavour to apply it to concrete circumstances. Too few Catholics know it and too few are therefore able to apply it to their daily lives at work and in society. Too few are able to use it in political and economic discussion, and too few are able to assess what is happening in society in the light of it. Too few draw on it in the formulation of political and economic policy. I invite you to purchase and read carefully the teachings of the popes on these matters,

such as, for instance, John Paul II's Encyclical on work, or Benedict XVI's Encyclical on *Charity in Truth*.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a great revolution occurred in European and British industry. The means of economic production were developed in remarkable steps. With this industrial revolution and success, notions of society and the state, notions of ownership and labour – notions that forgot the true interests of the individual – quickly took possession of those who controlled the means of production. What God has revealed about the nature of the human being and his true vocation in this world and in the next were lost from sight, and religion was relegated to private life. One such group of notions assumed that social and economic life ought allow for a completely free rein to the quest for economic profits, and that this profit motive would bring prosperity to society. It was a rampant economic liberalism that disregarded the suffering caused to the worker without capital. By contrast and in reaction to this, another set of notions assumed that the rights of individuals and groups should be

subordinated completely to a collective (rather than individual) organisation of production, controlled by the state. In both cases, in fact, "money" was the master which man served. There have been various notions of what is important to man in his social and economic life, but the ever-recurring danger is that of forgetting that in everything man is called to be God's servant, and never the servant of the creature. It is only the service of God which will provide a truly humane society, and bring true happiness to man. How a truly human vision of society and economic life is to be maintained in the modern world, with the vocation of the human person to be a servant of God and not of money being kept constantly in view, is spelt out in the Church's social teaching. This teaching applies what our Lord has revealed to modern life in its social and economic dimensions. At the heart of it is an understanding of and respect for the human person as God has revealed him to be. He is not just a means of production and profit, nor is he just a unit supporting the economic and political power of organizing bodies. He has a vocation from God for both this world and the next. He is called to serve God with all his heart in

everything. As our Lord tells us, you cannot serve God and money. For the sake of the flourishing of society, this divinely revealed but revolutionary idea has to gain ground. Man, society and the world needs God to flourish.

Let us resolve to put on the mind of Christ in respect to all aspects of human life, including social and economic life. This will be done by growing in the knowledge of what the Church our Mother teaches, including what she teaches about the economic and social life of the world in general. Let us make it our business to get hold of this teaching, as expressed in the social Encyclicals of the Popes, and study it. Man's true vocation to be a servant of God above all else is to be placed at the centre of all human activity, and its implications understood and brought to bear on all his activity.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2407-2436
(Respect for people and their goods. The social doctrine of the church, economic activity, and social justice)

A Second Reflection (1 Timothy 2:1-8)

Jesus Christ In our first reading from the letter to Timothy today, St Paul urges that we pray for all, but the reason he gives for this is the point to notice here. For, St Paul says, God desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth. The great reason for praying for everyone is that God wishes all to be saved. So we ought pray that his divine will be done. He loves all, whatever be their religion, or even if they have none. He created us to be happy, and has told us where we are to find the happiness he has planned for us. It is to be found in friendship with him, and he has come among us in the person of his Son Jesus to make this friendship so much more possible. Even when we frustrate his plan for us by sinning, he still offers salvation through Jesus, provided we come to him for pardon. God is every man's happiness. There is a further point. God wants all to be saved, St Paul says, and to reach full knowledge of the truth. It is most important that all come to know the truth of the one true God who has revealed himself to us. *'For there is only one God, and there is only one*

mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus' (1 Timothy 2: 1-8). As our Lord himself said at the Last Supper, no one comes to the Father but through me, and as Peter said before the Sanhedrin, his is the only name by which we can be saved. We ought keep this uncompromising dogma of the Christian faith clearly in mind in this day and age. It is an age when we are blessed with a greater appreciation of the elements of truth and goodness in other religions. While those religions exemplify and illustrate man's striving after God and contain very many elements of truth (including, of course, many elements of error), it is only Christ who truly takes us to salvation in God, because he is himself God, and our Redeemer as well. He is the unfailing way to God, provided we take it. His life is the most perfect expression of God's plan for us.

Christ is the embodiment of God, the image of the unseen God. In him dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily. Many do not know Christ. Many try to approach God through other means, and other names. I remember attending a talk by a professor of religious

studies, who was a member of the Zoroastrian faith, founded by Zarathustra in Persia some centuries before Christ. It was clear that the professor did not believe that any one religion has the full truth, rather that all had bits of it. In fact he thought that religion is best described as a "technology" – a way to get things done. The Christian religion is in contradiction to this. St Paul says that in Christ we receive every heavenly blessing. All too often the Christian does not take advantage of the supreme benefit he has of possessing Christ by virtue of baptism. Christian teaching is clear: Jesus is the fullness of God corporally. As such he is God's gift of himself to humanity. There are millions who have not known Christ and who do not know him. Whether they realize it or not, whatever truth and grace is enjoyed in the practice of religion, it will be a means of salvation only if it comes ultimately from Christ. He is the only way to the Father. He is the way, the truth and the life. Any saving truth comes from Jesus, and the unseen Jesus can be located here on earth. He is to be found in his Church. The Christian knows this, but he must act on it and use wisely the time and all the resources he has been given by God. And this is the

point made in today's Gospel (Luke 16: 1-13). The unjust steward was not praised for being dishonest with his master's money. He was praised for being smart in his cunning use of means to attain his chosen goals. The goal of the Christian is to know, love and serve Jesus and so be with him forever in heaven. So let us be smart in the use we make of all that God has given us, whether it be our talents, our time, our possessions, our money.

Let us then use all life's resources to attain union with Jesus, to bring others into union with him, and to serve the church, the world, and society in such a way that God will be truly honoured and glorified.



Monday of the Twenty-fifth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Dan 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

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Scripture today: Proverbs 3:27-34; Psalm: 15:2-5; Luke 8:16-18

No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the

open. Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him.” (Luke 8:16-18)

He who has not I once read an eye-witness account of the death of a Satanist. The man was in hospital and he was clearly drawing near the end of his life. He had his Satanist coat in his wardrobe and was being visited by a fervent Catholic layman who subsequently published an account. The Catholic sensed the presence of evil in the room and began praying to the Holy Trinity, to Our Lady, to St Michael and the angels and saints, that the man might be freed from his profound attachment to the demonic. The man had but a couple of days to live and his visitor kept up his prayers unremittingly, while staying in touch with his Jesuit spiritual director and with prayer-group friends in his parish. At a certain point the patient began to be especially agitated, and his face began to show torment. The prayers were intensified, but the torment increased and suddenly special burn marks appeared on the forehead of the dying patient. The nurses were horrified at what they

saw. It seemed as if the demonic was crushing its hapless adherent, who soon after died in awful distress. His visitor kept up his prayers for the deceased, trusting that due to the prayers, mercy would have been shown him. The case surely illustrates that usually as we live so shall we die. Of course, we cannot pin God down to any necessary rule of action, and his powerful mercy springs surprises. Nevertheless, death is the supreme moment of life, and the harvest of life is usually reaped at death. In large measure we shall perform at a test in the measure that we have prepared for it. In like manner, we must expect that we shall perform at the test of death in the measure that we have prepared for it by our life. If a car is speeding towards a precipice, it is to be expected that it will fall into the precipice once it is reached. When Christ announced the doctrine of the Eucharist at Capernaum, he warned the Twelve that one of them was a devil (John 6: 70-71). But despite the warning, Judas continued on his course. At the Last Supper, there was a final warning, but to no avail. Satan entered into him, and he went out. It was night (John 13:26-27).

In our Gospel today, our Lord makes a sombre revelation. It is that "*Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him*" (Luke 8:16 18). A widow is nearly ninety years of age. She has had several children. From her earliest years she has been prayerful, has submitted with all her heart to the teaching of the Church and made it the rule of her life. She loves the Eucharistic Jesus, and at her advanced age still goes to daily Mass unfailingly. She receives the Sacrament of Penance regularly. All she wants for her children is that they cope properly with life and above all live faithfully according to their Catholic faith. That is to say, she has the faith and she has kept it. The days, the weeks and the months pass, and her life-long religious practice seems to grow. It is unthinkable to those who know her that she would ever fail in it. She has, and it appears that she is being given more. By contrast, there are others in her own locality who have gradually dropped the practice of their faith, and it has slipped out of their lives like running water through the fingers of a person's hand. What they once had has passed away from them. Is it to be expected that it will be regained? It could be, and the

prayers of others for this intention are needed. We must pray for ourselves and for those most in need of the mercy of God. But our Lord's warning is ominous. He says that "*whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him.*" It seems that those who do not have are rendering themselves helpless – and so they depend enormously on the prayers and the spiritual help of others. There is a wonderful prayer that is now usually said at the end of each decade of the Rosary. "*O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and bring all souls to heaven, especially those most in need of your divine mercy.*" We ought pray for all, especially those most in need of the mercy of God. His mercy and power are unlimited, and this is our hope in the thought of those "who do not have."

When Christ was importuned by the Canaanite woman to heal her daughter, he told his disciples that his mission was to the lost sheep of the House of Israel (Matthew 15: 24). There were sheep that were lost, and his mission was to reclaim them. When criticized by the scribes and Pharisees for dining with publicans and sinners, he replied

that he was sent to the sick. The thought of damnation is a terrible thought, and Christ spoke of it often. The course of life prepares for the moment of death. While God alone plumbs the soul, still, as we die, so shall our eternity be. Let us so live as to be ready for the Lord when he comes at death, and let us pray for those who forget this.



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Scripture today: Proverbs 21:1-6.10-13; Psalm 118; Luke 8:19-21

The mother and the brothers of Jesus came looking for him, but they could not get to him because of the crowd. He was told, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside and want to see you.' But he said in

answer, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice.' (Luke 8:19-21)

Being Good Ethics is at the centre of human thought. A major current in philosophical thought over the last couple of centuries, since Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), has been Utilitarianism. Since Bentham, prominent Utilitarians have included John Stuart Mill, Henry Sidgwick, R.M. Hare and in our own day the Australian Peter Singer. This view posits the *consequences* of an action as being the standard of right and wrong, and more specifically its *utility*. It is good if it is *useful* – usefulness being described and defined in various ways. The other major influence during this same period has been Kant (who was critical of Utilitarianism). He was influential especially in his ethical theory. Two of his important works were, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1787). For Kant what makes an action good is the motive: *duty*. It is the motive of duty (in one's action) which makes an action good, and

this duty is an unconditional imperative which reason dictates. Kant gave his rule to determine what one ought to do in any situation. It is this: "*Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.*" In 1958 Elisabeth Anscombe published her well-known paper titled "Modern Moral Philosophy" attacking both currents, and it set the course for a new spread of *virtue ethics*. She took her cue from Aristotle, and hoisted the mast of character, virtue and flourishing. Especially influential in her line has been Alasdair MacIntyre. Where the Utilitarians and Kantians concern themselves with the moral *action* (as they conceive this to be), *virtue ethics* sees itself as concerned with the good *life* and what *kinds of persons* we should be. I myself prefer the approach of John Henry Newman who, as part of the Oxford Movement and an Aristotelian, stressed the importance of *virtue* in knowing what is morally good. There is not much chance of the confirmed bad man being able to judge well and consistently on what is ethically right. A man's moral ethos will be decisive even in his *knowing* what is right, let alone his doing it. It is the good man who best knows what is good,

though he becomes good by choosing to *do* what is good. The dynamic between character and choice of action is reciprocal.

All this philosophical discussion is useful. Kant argued against the Utilitarian position with his stress on the imperative character of duty, irrespective of what is deemed to be its utility. He seems to have forgotten to stress, though, that the accurate perception of one's duty will depend very much on one's moral character, and that in a certain sense moral character is the *end* of doing one's duty. Be all this as it may, the vast multitude of the human family who are not philosophically inclined have the resounding benefit of their natural moral instincts and divine revelation. There are two things man *naturally knows* he is called to. Put simply, he is called to *do* good and he is called to *be* good. He is called to *choose right action* and to be *virtuous in character*. He knows he is morally obliged to do what is good and avoid doing what is evil, and by this means to be virtuous as a person. He also has the sense that in some way he will be rewarded for this. He senses that if he consistently *does* what is evil he will *be* evil in

character, and as a result be punished. These are the basic issues and it is difficult for a person not to know this. He *naturally* knows it – however he might philosophize and provide a theory about it. Now, over and above this natural knowledge which is instinctive to a normally functioning human mind, there is God’s revelation. God has said, *Be holy, for I am holy*. God has revealed that he is holy in character. He is morally good in a superlative sense – and he demands that we his creatures choose to be good and holy as well. So there we have, in revelation, the emphasis on character and virtue. But this involves keeping the Commandments – which is to say, *doing* what is good and avoiding what is evil by following in one’s *action* what God has revealed. But God has opened up for man a marvellous way for his moral flourishing. He is called and empowered to be united with the Son of God made man, to share his life, and to grow in the divine life. This begins with his act of faith in Jesus Christ and baptism. But then he must strive to *do God’s will*. That is the ongoing essential thing. He must endeavour to know what God wants, and then *do* it. This is the path to holiness. As St Paul writes, this is the will of

God, your sanctification. We are made holy by the grace of God, but our own resolution to *do* what is God's will is also essential.

Pope Benedict XV (1914-1921) stressed that God's will is expressed in one's duties of state. He taught that sanctity consists in striving to fulfil one's duties of state as perfectly as possible for love of God. So it is that we are brought to our Gospel today (Luke 8: 19-21), in which our Lord tells us who is the person who is closest to him, to him who is the absolute embodiment of holiness. Jesus Christ is the perfectly good *character*, the one who possesses full perfection in *virtue*. The person who is his brother and sister and mother is the one who *hears the will of God and puts it into practice*. Let the best philosophers of any age listen to the Son of God made man. As the Father said from the cloud on the Mountain in the presence of the three Apostles: *This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!*



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Scripture today: Proverbs 30:5-9; Psalm 118; Luke 9:1-6

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: Take nothing for the journey- no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no

extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, shake the dust off your feet when you leave their town, as a testimony against them. So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere. (Luke 9: 1-6)

Authority and Power One can have authority but little power. The Australian aboriginal population had the authority (because of long-standing use) to occupy their lands and defend them against invasion. But they lacked the power to do so in the face of the British arrival, and so they lost control of their lands. The papacy had the authority to rule over the papal states in the nineteenth century, but lacked the power to do so in the face of revolution and military aggression. In fact, it rarely had this power and depended on the power of others to defend its authority. On the other hand, a person can possess the power to do certain things, but not have the authority to do so. Lieutenant William Bligh was appointed Commanding Lieutenant of the HMS Bounty in August 1787 at the age of 32. He had been

sailing master of James Cook's HMS Resolution during Cook's final voyage (1776-1779). He had the authority to command the Bounty, but lost the power to do so when Fletcher Christian led his mutiny on 28 April 1789. Bligh and some fellow officers were set adrift in a small craft on the open sea. Christian seized the power without any authority to command the Bounty, while Bligh possessed the authority but had lost the power to do command it. In our Gospel today (Luke 9: 1-6) our Lord called the Twelve together and gave them both the power and the authority (*dunamin kai exousian*) over all the demons and to cure diseases. Having done this, he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. They went as his envoys, his ambassadors. We read elsewhere that when Christ selected from his disciples the Twelve, he called them "apostles" – *apostoloi*, ambassadors. They went as his envoys, with the formal authority to speak and act in his name. Not all his disciples had this "authority," this permission, this standing, as persons carrying a charge that came directly from him. The Twelve were invested with the *authority* of being the King's envoys. In their proclamation of the kingdom of God,

people were to respect and listen to them as envoys of the Messiah. *He who hears you*, our Lord said, *hears me* (Luke 10:16).

But further, they had been endowed with certain *powers*. Let us remember that many prophets had authority to speak in God's name, but lacked special powers. There is no indication that John the Baptist had any *powers* beyond the typical prophet, but he had full and high *authority* as a prophet, and the people knew this. We do not read of John having the *power* to drive out demons at a word, nor to heal the sick at a word. His *authority* to announce God's word was recognized because he claimed it, and proved it by both the word of God's manifest persuasiveness and by the holiness of his own life. We do not read of Jeremiah driving out demons nor of his healing the sick. Now, the Twelve accompanying our Lord were not sent out by him as persons whose manifest holiness of life would vindicate their authority to speak of the kingdom of God. At this point, they were good Jews, but there is no indication that any of them were *saints* as yet, whereas John the Baptist was a living saint. Yet Christ gave to them his *authority* to

speaking in his name. Just as a classical prophet (say, Micah, Hosea, and many others) was given the authority by God to speak in his name, so the Twelve were given the authority by Christ to speak *in his name*. They were, in this broad sense, "prophets" of Christ, though not speaking "under inspiration," as it were. In their case, their authority was buttressed not by their own eminent holiness but by the grant of power to cast out demons and to heal sicknesses. They had Christ's authority to speak in his name, and they had been granted a share in Christ's own powers. So they went out, confident in the *authority* granted them by their Master to speak in his name, and *empowered* to act as he had been acting. They preached the good news, drove out demons and healed the sick. It was a harbinger of what was to come. Just as Christ was about to ascend to the right hand of his heavenly Father, he charged his disciples to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations. They were to go on his authority, but also with the powers invested in the Church to endow with the Holy Spirit and to sanctify.

The Church bears with her the *authority* of Christ to preach, to define, to shepherd Christ's faithful and to sanctify. Christ has established and built his Church, and it has his authority to do what he charged it to do. It also has a great share in his *powers*. The Church has the *power* to bring the Sacraments to the faithful, the greatest of those powers being to celebrate the holy Eucharist. It has the power to teach the faith without error. It has the power to resist Satan and to bring the faithful to God as his children. Let us maintain in our hearts a profound reverence for the Church, our mother, who has been given the *authority and the power to take us to God*.



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Scripture today: Ecclesiastes 1:2-11; Psalm 89; Luke 9:7-9

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed, because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life. But Herod said, I

beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about? And he was eager to see him. (Luke 9:7-9)

Seeing Jesus We read in the Gospel of St John that before our Lord began his public ministry, John the Baptist saw him coming to him and said – obviously to certain others – that the One approaching him was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He was the One whom he, John, was sent to make known to Israel, and on him he had seen the Spirit descend like a dove. Jesus would baptize not with mere water, but with the Holy Spirit. So Christ's identity and the essentials of his mission were announced (John 1: 29-34). The "next day" he pointed him out again, this time to two of his disciples. He was encouraging them to follow him, which they did. The two heard about Jesus from John, saw him, followed him, and entered into his personal friendship. They came, they saw, and they were conquered. Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, and Simon was told by Christ of his future vocation and mission. Philip was invited to follow him, and he did so immediately. At Philip's invitation, Nathanael came, and was

won over entirely: "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel (the Messiah)!*" That is to say, Christ's first manifestation evoked the response of faith, and John's account implies that this stood to reason. But it was not long before the opposite response showed itself. On his cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem, the leaders of the Jews challenged his authority, demanding signs to prove it. So it is that the Gospels portray the revelation of the Son of God to the people, and the profoundly mixed response to this revelation. There were divine signs. At the wedding feast of Cana, Christ worked the miracle of the water being changed into wine. The disciples saw his glory and believed in him. Others saw signs, and did *not* believe in him. The response of those who heard of him, who saw him and who listened to him, was governed very largely by their prior moral dispositions. We are reminded of the parable of the sower sowing his seed. The power of the seed to produce the harvest was dependent on the quality of the soil on which it fell.

Our Gospel today is a case in point. Herod Antipas heard about Jesus. In fact, he heard a good deal about him. Luke writes that he "heard all (*panta*) the things (that were) happening". John the Baptist had been a great voice in the land, a voice that had come right into Herod's presence to denounce his union with Herodias. That voice had been silenced, and yet out of nowhere another voice had suddenly sounded, and one far greater than John's. Indeed, in the previous chapter Luke mentions that Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, was among Christ's travelling band. She was among those who "ministered to them out of her possessions" (Luke 8: 3). Perhaps some of Chuza's pay from his service as manager of Herod's household was finding its way through his wife to the support of Christ. But Herod was simply perplexed. There was nothing in him of a moral inclination towards the Person of Jesus, as was evident in the wife of his own steward. Herod was puzzled, intrigued, curious, mystified. Who was this Person he was hearing about? What did he look like, and how did he perform? Probably he had heard from Chuza that Joanna, whom he would have known, had been healed from a serious ailment (Luke 8: 2)

and was entirely devoted to the great prophet. Indeed, she was busily supporting him. In fact, Herod was hearing all sorts of things. Some were saying he was John the Baptist back from the grave, others that he was Elijah or one of the prophets come back. There was no denying the distinction of the One now being spoken of. And so, we read, "Herod sought to see him" (Luke 9:9). Herod was like so many who are and have been curious about Jesus. But his desire to see Jesus was utterly and completely fruitless. It led to nothing, and when he finally did see Jesus, Jesus would not speak to him. As our Lord said, *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*. A right and good heart is necessary to see God, and Jesus Christ is God. Herod's case was virtually hopeless, so sunk in sin was he. Or again, we may think of the tragic case of Judas who "saw" Christ daily, and yet whose moral decay led him to lose the sight of him, on to his doom.

Let us be filled with the desire to see Jesus. Our life's goal is to see Jesus. We ought understand life's supreme moment, which is death, as the moment when we go forth to see Jesus. But we shall only see

him if we work hard, consistently and with the aid of God's grace, to achieve the necessary purity of *heart*. We must put on the mind of Christ and become like him. In this way shall we be such as to be admitted forever into his presence. Let us take our stand with Jesus, and live consistently each day according to that stand.



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Scripture today: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-11; Psalm 143; Luke 9:18-

22

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, Who do the crowds say I am? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the

prophets of long ago has come back to life. But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Peter answered, The Christ of God. Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be put to death and on the third day be raised to life. (Luke 9:18-22)

Who do you say I Am? We do not, of course, have the complete works of Aristotle, but we have a thick volume of what is extant of them – notes, jottings, longer treatises. For long centuries since his death three hundred years before Christ, his philosophical material has been the foundation of much of human thought and speculation. But what of his life and person? There never has been a similar interest in that. In a certain sense his life and person are relatively unimportant, whereas his *thought* has immense significance. He was long regarded as “The Philosopher.” Many have been enamoured Aristotelians, while knowing virtually nothing of, and having no interest in, Aristotle himself. Again, the plays and poetry of Shakespeare are regarded as

literature of genius, and are the object of unending study and education. But what of his life and person? This too has been the object of sustained research – especially in recent years because of his probable Catholicism. Nevertheless, his literary work is seen as of foremost importance. It eclipses his person. One can be an enamoured Shakespearean while having little interest in William Shakespeare himself. Sacred as is the name of Mahomet to the Muslim, what is important for Islam is Allah and the *Koran*. Mahomet's work was to be, as Islam views it, Allah's Messenger, and no more. He is not the object of the Muslim's life. The *Koran* is seen as far transcending Mahomet himself. The case is not the same with Christianity and its teaching. Christian doctrine, considered as a body of thought, does not transcend Jesus Christ. In the mind of his followers, the *Person* of Jesus Christ is not in any sense eclipsed by his work and his teaching. Christianity is not just a body of revealed thought or writing which has been the object of unending attention and study. Christianity in the first instance is *a relationship with a Person*. One cannot be a

true Christian without knowing, loving and serving that *Person*, and Christian doctrine is precisely doctrine about that Person.

The New Testament is full of teaching and doctrine. Our Lord began his public ministry with the call to repent, for the Kingdom of God was near. He travelled throughout Galilee and Judea preaching the Kingdom of God, its nature, and its demands for life. The prophets had preached what God required, but with Jesus what became evident was that *he himself* was to be the object of man's religion. Take one instance – which, in its own way was breathtaking. We read in the Gospel of St Matthew (19: 16-22) that a man came to Jesus to ask what good deed he had to do to gain eternal life. Keep the commandments, Christ said – an answer that was in the direct line of all the prophets. What more need I do? the man asked. Then comes an astonishing answer – if Christ were being viewed as merely a great prophet. *"If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."* If you detach yourself from the things of this world and follow

me, you will be on the path not only to heaven, but to *perfection*. The kingdom of God is attained by means of an ardent love for, and following of, Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God consists in a full-hearted union with the Person of Jesus Christ. That is to say, the foremost thing about the Christian religion is not the "thought" or the teaching of Jesus Christ, nor, absolutely speaking, his "work," but his very Person. It is by entering into union with his Person that his "work" is appropriated, and his "thought" or doctrine is made fruitful. The heart, the soul, the length and the breadth of the Christian religion is the Person of Jesus Christ. One cannot merely study the "thought" or teaching of Jesus Christ and be relatively uninterested in his Person. Being a "Christian" is not like being an "Aristotelian" or a "Shakespearean". The true Christian totally accepts his teaching precisely because it is the teaching of *this particular Person*, not because it seems to be excellent teaching. Our Gospel passage today (Luke 9: 18-22) comes well into our Lord's public ministry. A critical step must be made, and that is that his very Person must be known. Who do the crowds say *I* am? But *who* do you say *I* am? It is

absolutely essential that we have a true knowledge of Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus of Nazareth, historical figure of a particular time and locality, is the eternal God. He is the Son of God made man, and the long-awaited Messiah. All authority on earth and in heaven has been given to him. He is Master and Lord, Lord of lords and King of kings, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the Word of God, the image of the unseen God, and is himself God. As Pope Benedict XVI was fond of saying, he is the face of God. By knowing, accepting, believing, loving, and following *him*, we shall be saved. It is *he* and he alone who can take us to perfection. He, Jesus Christ!



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Scripture today: Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:8; Psalm 89; Luke 9:43b-45

While everyone was marvelling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. But they did not

understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it. (Luke 9: 43b-45)

He must suffer Gaius Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul extended the Roman sphere to the North Sea. In 55 BC he led Rome's first invasion of Britain. These were great achievements, and his military power threatened to surpass that of Pompey the Great. The subsequent stand-off between the two led to Caesar's famous crossing of the Rubicon with his army in 49 BC, a decisive violation of Roman law that amounted to treason and sacrilege. It was an unparalleled mutiny by the leading general of the day, fuelled by ambition. He prevailed, and was eventually declared dictator of Rome in perpetuity. In his mind, of course, humiliation and death would have constituted total failure. *Dominance* was success. The very thought of his subsequent assassination would have been a meaningless horror to him. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Napoleon Bonaparte marched against the powers of Europe and smashed them. By the end of that decade, France dominated Europe and glowered across the channel at Britain as

the economic war between the two intensified. Bonaparte's idea of success was *dominance*. To be dominated and rejected and to fail, let alone to end in confinement and oblivion, would have been an absurdity. His six years of jail on the distant island of St Helena, and death by stomach cancer in his fifty-second year, was nothing other than the ultimate disappointment. What would Mahomet have thought if he had been told that his course would entail rejection in both Mecca and Medina, and, indeed, crucifixion? He would have perceived it as an absurdity to be avoided at all costs. Success meant prevailing over his enemies – and he did prevail spectacularly. Thus Islam went from strength to strength. Even if we take the great prophets of the Old Testament, we see that they were prepared to suffer for God and his word, but suffering and rejection was scarcely seen as a supremely necessary step in their mission. Success consisted in the word of God being accepted and lived by the people, and if they had to suffer for it, they accepted it. But typically *suffering* did not have a positive value. There were inspired voices which expressed this positive value, such as the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah, but it was not typical.

Our Lord's words in today's Gospel (Luke 9: 43b-45) are situated in the context of high admiration for him among the people. He was supremely good and possessed of effortless power. He was sought in order to expel the demon from a man's son, and his disciples had been incapable of doing so. There and then, the demon threw the child down in a violent paralysis. At a word Christ expelled the demon, and the people were left in awesome wonderment. But during this very amazement at his unique qualities, our Lord hastened to say emphatically to his disciples that, whatever about what they had just seen, *he was soon to suffer and be rejected*. They must bear this in mind, he said. "*Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men*" (Luke 9: 43b-45). He who was being victorious, had the mission *to be overcome*. But they simply could not understand. It was beyond their comprehension. How could such a thing happen, and why was he, who showed himself invincible and above every problem, speaking of having to be defeated? This is one of the several distinctive things about the Gospel, that the mission of the Messiah would involve

rejection, suffering and death. There were prophecies which included it – the most notable being that of Deutero-Isaiah, but they were forgotten. It needed the event to recall them and to bring them into the focus they required. The Servant of the Lord would suffer for the many. He would be pierced through for their offences, be like a lamb led to the slaughter, and be smitten for the sin of the people (Isaiah 55). Christ would have seen the incomprehension of his disciples. One wonders whether it was teaching such as this that disillusioned Judas, together with other teachings such as that on the Eucharist, in which Christ laid it down as necessary that his flesh be eaten and his blood be drunk. The ways of God for our salvation and sanctification are completely contrary to the ways of the world. It requires faith in Jesus to accept them, and a revolution of mind, such that we put on the mind of Christ, as St Paul writes.

The Cross is perhaps the toughest thing about Christian discipleship. If we wish to grow in that perfection planned for us by God, we must detach our hearts from everything else and follow Jesus

Christ. This includes accepting his doctrine of the Cross, the Cross which he embraced and carried to the end, and by which he redeemed the world. Our sanctification entails carrying the Cross. Let us give our hearts to Jesus Christ, understanding well that whatever be the glory, the Cross is its necessary means. So then, let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 9:43-45)

The meaning of Christ's Sufferings One leading British anthropologist of primal religions (Evans-Pritchard) once wrote that one way of considering and understanding primal religions is to ask how they deal with the problem of suffering and evil. That is a useful key to the understanding of the world's religions. It also indicates that the problem of the meaning of evil and suffering is a perennial one that has been at the forefront of man's life and his culture through the ages. Our Lord repeatedly referred to his own sufferings in his conversations with his disciples. It was at the forefront of his mission and of God's plan. In our passage today (Luke 9: 43-45) he says that as the promised

Son of Man, the Messiah, he was "going to be handed over into the power of men." But they could not understand the meaning of it, and they were too afraid to ask him.

This is a most important grace to ask for, that we be granted to understand that the Cross was necessary for Christ, and necessary for his disciples. We are called to follow in his footsteps along the path of the Cross. If we aspire to be his true disciples, we ought ask God to give us the grace to accept the Cross, and to unite ourselves with the crucified and risen Jesus.



Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Dan 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 6:1.4-7; Psalm 145;

1 Timothy 6:11-16; Luke 16:19-31

Jesus said to the Pharisees: "There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores,

who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he cried out, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.' Abraham replied, 'My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.' He said, 'Then I beg you, father, send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.' But Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.' He said, 'Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them,

they will repent.' Then Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.'" (Luke 16:19-31)

Rich and Poor Today's Gospel presents us with our Lord's famous parable of "*a rich man who used to dress in purple and fine linen and feast magnificently every day. And at his gate there lay a poor man called Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to fill himself with the scraps that fell from the rich man's table*" (Luke 16: 19-31). The message is clear: God's judgment hangs over the one who refuses to give to the poor when he is in a position to do so. The rich man died and was buried, and in his torment in Hades, he saw Lazarus the poor man a long way off in the arms of Abraham. In his description of the Last Judgment in the 25th Chapter of St Matthew, Christ as Judge condemns to hell those who refused during life to help those in need. *I was hungry and you never gave me to eat. And later, Whatever you did to the least of these my brothers, you did to me, he will say to them.* We are challenged by Christ's parable today to ask ourselves, what is my

attitude and my behaviour towards the poor person? Am I a little like the rich man of the parable? My salvation and the sanctification to which I am called, depend on the answer to this question. But our Lord's story has implications well beyond the concern that an individual who has should have for an individual who has not. It also concerns the relationship that should exist between nations that are poor and those that are rich. The rich man of the story not only represents the rich individual, but also rich nations and whole groups of nations. Just as there was a terrible gap between the rich man in the story and the poor man Lazarus, so there is a terrible gap between rich and poor nations, due to unequal economic resources and capacity. The teaching of the parable applies to the life of the individual, and also to the world at large. It offers the key to international justice and solidarity, and thereby the key to peace in the world. Just as the rich man of the parable failed to live in true solidarity with the poor man Lazarus and utterly disregarded and neglected him, so too whole nations can fail to live in solidarity with needy nations. We are all members of God's

family. We are all God's children, and nations must keep this in mind, just as individuals must.

Our world conducts its affairs as if God is no more than the private persuasion of individuals and not the overarching Fact of the universe. This lack of a living conviction of the universal fatherhood of God constitutes a world-wide flaw in the life of nations. Indeed, it is one basic reason for poverty in the world. If nations were possessed of a living and agreed (and not just notional) conviction that God is our common Father and that we are all brothers of one single family under him who is our Creator, the policy of nations would be shaped by a culture of solidarity. Let us also remember that the burden of poverty that oppresses whole nations is not just poverty of food or material aid. It also involves a poverty in structures and institutions. These structures can be channels of oppression that impede development. A poor African nation burdened with a huge debt which imposes a crippling interest rate has no chance to develop. The structure imposes poverty. Because of that pattern of debt and interest, the country

continues year after year to be the poor man Lazarus of the Gospel, while the rich nations that do nothing about that debt continue to be the rich man who was condemned. The judgment of God hangs over the rich, and that judgment can take effect not only in the life to come, but in this world too. The Church teaches that rich nations have a grave moral responsibility towards the development of poor nations. Of course, this is a complex duty. Institutions created in and by the poor countries themselves can impoverish their own populations – such as the endemic corruption of the powerful within those countries. Now, while it is the competence of the Church's pastors to give the Church's general teaching and to insist on moral principles, in its practical detail the service of the poor in justice and charity is especially a task for the laity. A civilization of *love* has to be built, because the Creator of the world is love. It is especially the role of the laity to make the world more human, more just, more filled with solidarity, more filled with the spirit of Christ. The laity's home is the world, and the laity's field of work is the world. Their mission is to apply the parable of our Gospel today to the world in all its complexity and practical detail.

The question we could ask ourselves today is, do I *care* very much about these matters? What, concretely speaking, am I doing to promote justice and solidarity between the rich and poor at an individual level in my personal life, and, further, among the nations of the world? Am I even taking an interest in such matters? The poor are there at the gate, and the rich are not far from them. Where do I stand, and what am I doing? Lazarus was taken by the angels to Abraham. The rich man went to hell, not because he was rich, but because he did nothing about the poor man before him. Why was this? It was probably because he did not *care*.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2437 2442

(Justice and Solidarity Amongst Nations)

A Second Reflection: Luke 16:19-31

True Treasure The parable of the rich man and the poor man Lazarus in today's gospel is a famous one. It is a principal resource for one of Pope John Paul II's encyclicals. The rich man provided for his life here

on earth, but stored nothing for his life hereafter, and so he lost everything in hell. Our parable today tells us how to ensure for life hereafter, a life that will last for eternity. The great fact before us in this life is death and the judgment that follows it. Our Lord's parable calls us to justice and charity, and it teaches us that the thought of death and God's judgment will help us to be just and charitable. I read once of a research project which concluded that confronting people with the fact that they will die can make them cling to their deepest moral values. It can exercise their moral minds wonderfully. That is exactly what the Old Testament book of Sirach advises: "*In all you do remember the end of your life and you will never sin*" (Sirach 7:36). Many forget what conscience intimates, that we shall have to render an account of everything we have done or failed to do for the poor. Jesus lived in poverty and ended his life in humiliation. But let us imagine an opposite possibility. What if God had willed Jesus his Son to live in wealth, just to show the wealthy how to use their wealth? Imagine if Jesus had been living in a palace as did the rich man of the parable, with Lazarus appealing for help at his door. What would Jesus have

done for Lazarus? He would have helped him abundantly. Again, let us imagine a different but not unlikely scenario. What would have happened if a poor or sick person had presented himself at the doorway of the Holy Family in Nazareth? We are not told, but the answer is evident. He would have been helped. Jesus who was rich in glory from all eternity made himself poor for us, so that we might be rich in glory. Despite this example and despite the grace we have to imitate it, we all too readily neglect those who are poor. We must take to heart our Lord's warning in the Gospel: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Riches constitute a danger. Greed is the mark of the rich man in the parable, and the rich man went to hell. He had plenty, but he was still greedy, and St Paul writes that greed is like worshipping a false god. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," our Lord said, "for theirs is the kingdom of God." In Jesus is present the Kingdom of God in its fullness. He himself is the exemplar of the beatitude that he

preached. There have been many who have followed Christ in poverty of spirit – and in material poverty too. St Francis of Assisi was poor in spirit, wanting nothing, giving up everything, and loving everything and everyone as a result. He loved God, he loved Christ, he loved humanity, he loved nature, and he loved poverty for Christ's sake. He regarded poverty as a most precious jewel. Unlike the rich man of the parable, he clung to nothing. Whatever he had, he gave. He was like Christ who did not cling to his glory as God but gave it all up to enrich us. The parable of Christ teaches us how to use the wealth we have. In the book of Genesis, Cain asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Our Lord gives the answer in our parable, Yes! Our eternal destiny hinges on the way we serve as our brother's keeper, on how we love, and indeed on the way we use our money. If we love money, it will become our master, and we its slave. Money is to be used to serve in a way that will honour God, and help us gain friends who will welcome us hereafter. The rich man in our Lord's parable was condemned because he dishonoured God by failing to honour his poor brother, Lazarus. Lazarus is everywhere in our life. We will find him at our

doors every time we watch the television, in the movement of millions of refugees and in the seething arena of war and natural disaster. Our conscience, and both Christ and his Church, will give us no true rest until we take these things to heart and live them. So then, are we a little like the rich man in the parable? Perhaps we are very much like him. Let us examine our consciences, and ask for the grace to desire to live in the spirit of poverty, like our Lord — not necessarily in actual physical poverty, but with our spirit detached from this world's goods. If we are governed by a love for money and possessions, we shall neglect Lazarus at our doorstep.

Let us take our daily cue from God our heavenly Father who unhesitatingly shared with us his own beloved Son. Let us take our cue from Christ his Son who did not cling to his riches but became poor for our sake. In receiving him we received every heavenly blessing. In him we are made rich with the true riches. Let us pray for the grace today to seek the wealth that God wants to give us. It comes from being in him and from being like him in our attitude to those in need.



Monday of the Twenty-sixth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Dan 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

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Scripture today: Job 1:6-22; Psalm 16; Luke 9:46-50

An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and made him stand beside him. Then he said to them, Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me

welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all- he is the greatest. Master, said John, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us. Do not stop him, Jesus said, for whoever is not against you is for you. (Luke 9:46-50)

A Little Child Immediately before this incident of the argument among the disciples, our Lord had told them that "*the Son of man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men*" (Luke 9: 44). We read that they did not understand what he said – it was hidden from them. It was hidden from them probably for the same reason that led to the argument which Luke then narrates, in our Gospel today (Luke 9: 46-50). The argument was over who among them was the greatest. Our Lord had chosen as his principal companions and co-labourers good and observant Jews, but who as yet were far from having attained heroic and enlightened sanctity. The Kingdom of God was being proclaimed, and it was clear that Jesus their Master was to be its King. They were privileged to be called to be part of the great adventure. They were to

be in the forefront, in the immediate company of the Master. They undoubtedly felt the glow of personal importance, while at the same time being genuinely in love with their Master, and desirous of serving God well. It was naturally incomprehensible to them to hear our Lord's words stating that he was to be seized, maltreated and overcome. How was this compatible with a King and a Kingdom? Judas may have reasoned further: what sort of a kingdom was this to be, then? So it is that we see them in our scene today squabbling over their relative positions. Here there were twelve men living and working together, all of them novices in the following of Jesus Christ, all of them yet to receive the Spirit of God which would endow them with the mind of Jesus Christ. At this point, inevitably there were tensions and at times a certain jealousy among them. On one occasion the mother of James and John went to our Lord with her sons and asked of him the favour of granting them principal positions in his Kingdom. The others were incensed at this attempt to gain special advantage. In our passage today, John tells our Lord that "we" tried to stop someone who was "not one of us" from acting in Jesus' name. It looks, at least partially, like a

jealous attempt to preserve their own turf, and the glory associated with it.

Our Lord strove to instruct his disciples in the true way they were to live. *"Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and made him stand beside him. Then he said to them, Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all- he is the greatest."* A child! Let us think of the love Jesus had for children. On one occasion his disciples tried to put a stop to the press of parents who were clamouring to have their children blessed by Jesus. Our Lord immediately rebuked his disciples for their misplaced concern for him. *For it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs*, he said. Our Lord, of course, was not holding up before them every aspect of the mind and heart of a child – the child's petulance and wilfulness, for instance. He was holding up the child as one who looks eagerly to its parents for what it needs, as one who obeys readily its parents, as one who follows trustingly its parents and keeps close to

them. The child, typically, accepts its littleness and its need for direction. That is to say, the child is an image of docility and obedience. In fact, the model Child is Jesus Christ himself, in that he is God's only-begotten Son, absolutely obedient to the Father's will. His gift to mankind would be the grace to share by adoption in his relationship with his heavenly Father. To all who receive him, St John tells us in the Prologue of his Gospel, he gives the power to become children of God. The fundamental calling of the Christian is to be a child of God, a member of his family in Jesus Christ, sharing his divine life. This means putting on the mind of Christ, who, being rich, made himself poor that we might be rich. The child is little before others, and typically the child accepts this. So too the Christian must be little, and not seek to be regarded as great. Such was Christ himself. Though he had the glory proper to God, he did not hesitate to put it all aside and become as we are, and humbler still, even to death on the Cross. Thus God raised him up. The mind of Christ is a mind of obedience, docility, humility, meekness, yet of great strength withal.

In holding up the child as a kind of icon for their imitation, Christ opened a way contrary to that of the world. At the Last Supper, our Lord rose and began to wash the feet of his disciples. It was the action of a servant, even of a slave. I have set you an example, he said. What I have done to you, so you should do to one another. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not the business of being the greatest. It is the business of being the *least*, and this is expressed especially in *service*. Humility is the foundation. *Come to me*, our Lord said, *and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart*. Let us each day do something concrete in putting on this mind of Jesus Christ.

A Second Reflection: (Job 1:6-22)

Sufferings Permitted by God Consider the dialogue between God and Satan in the first chapter of the book of Job (1: 6-22). God delights in Job, is proud of him, and praises him. This is what characterizes the God of love. Satan is presented as being hostile to Job and critical of him. He is the accuser — and that is how he is towards us. He delights in accusing us as he did Job. The book of Job goes on to describe the

tremendous afflictions that fell upon Job, a just man who deserved nothing of it. The words of God himself assure us of his virtue: he tells Satan with pride that *"there is no one like him on the earth: a sound and honest man who fears God and shuns evil."* So how is it that he came to bear such awesome afflictions? Where did they come from? They came, according to our passage, from Satan. Satan is intent on taking Job away from the God fearing-path that has marked his life, and he intends to do it by means of sufferings. God permits Satan to do this, but always within certain limits: *"Very well,"* the Lord said to Satan, *"all he has is in your power. But keep your hands off his person."* God permits Satan to bring down upon the head of Job these afflictions in order to prove and show forth his virtue. In the process, Job will glorify God and be even more pleasing to him. It is a loving test permitted by God, and God is confident that Job will prove himself.

When we suffer, it is an opportunity to give glory to God and be even more pleasing to him. If God permits it, let us look on it as an opportunity, remembering Job, a type of Christ.

Tuesday of the Twenty-sixth Week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Dn 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Job 3:1-3.11-17.20-23; Psalm 87; Luke 9:51-56

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for

Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village. (Luke 9:51-56)

Tomorrow The rolling hills and green trees appear beautiful. All is quiet, with the sound of the running brook gently breaking the silence. All else is still, and suddenly a black bird flies across the landscape as the visitor to the scene looks on. It is a crow, and it is making its characteristic cry. Its cry peals out, a single sound, constantly repeated. The crow has no music in its hoarse song. There is no lullaby, no melody, no variety in its repertoire. What a contrast with the sound of the bellbird, or the canary, or any one of a number of other birds! All it can do is utter one sound with its single note. It is like the repeated bark of a tiny dog that has one sound to make from its throat as it travels ahead. The visitor to the scene is a Latin scholar – he teaches and researches Latin at university – and as he looks at the crow flying forward and pealing out its cry, he imagines it to be calling out a

Latin word. The word is *Cras! Cras! Cras! Cras!* One sound fills the scene, and it is *Cras!* Nothing else is heard in the beautiful terrain, except for the murmur of the brook as it makes its way over the rocks and leaves in its path. *Cras?* Tomorrow! Always *tomorrow*, the crow seems to be warning the world, and in particular the visitor who watches on. The word from the crow is the voice of his conscience, being reflected by the call of the flying bird. *Cras!* You are always going to do tomorrow what you should do now! You are not facing up to your present duties. You are putting off what is difficult. You are always choosing today what is the easy and more congenial course. Your life consists of pipe-dreams. You hope to do all that you know you should do, you intend doing it, you have plenty of good intentions, but you do not get down to it *now*. It is always tomorrow, tomorrow, *tomorrow*. You are self-indulgent. You do not forgive now. You continue doing what you enjoy, not what serves God and neighbour. This groove you are in is the death-knell to grandeur in your ordinary life as a family man, husband, father, university teacher. You never get down to it *now*. You could become a saint, but you are

always putting it off. In particular, you hate and avoid the cross of Christ. *Cras!* For you, it is always tomorrow!

In our Gospel today (Luke 9: 51-56), we have a vivid scene of the determined Christ. The time was approaching for him to be taken up to heaven. His time was short. He had spent himself for the lost sheep of the House of Israel. He was the Bridegroom, and he had given himself to the bride, and he was about to give himself to the end. The climax of his mission was approaching, and once that climax had been reached, surmounted and conquered, the great gates would he left asunder for all to pass through. The mountain had been reached, and he was about to climb. There was no *Cras* with Christ. A terrible ordeal awaited him, the like of which had never been experienced by any individual in history, nor would it ever be. He was about to bear in himself the temporal consequences of the sin of the entire world. He would be treated as if he were the sin of the world, and by his endurance, he would expiate for it. When we think of the Passion of Christ, we naturally think of the terrible ordeal of a Roman

crucifixion. But that does not exhaust the scale of suffering it involved for him, for he was bearing within that punishment what no other crucified man bore. When we attempt to imagine what Jesus Christ suffered, we ought attempt to imagine the sin of the world. It is with this that he was being burdened. The physical and mental anguish of crucifixion was, we might say, the mere tip of the iceberg. In the midst of this degradation he even bore the incalculable and indescribable anguish of abandonment by his heavenly Father – for he was, as it were, the world's sin. No other suffering could be compared with it, but in the plan of God the Messiah had thus to suffer in order to enter his glory. And so he "set his face to go to Jerusalem." There was no Tomorrow with Jesus Christ, no *Cras! Cras!* There ought be no putting off of duty in the life of the Christian either. It is a fundamental reason for the non-attainment of sanctity, that we put things off. We feel the summons of conscience and of grace. It involves difficulty. It involves the Cross. So, imperceptibly we put it off till *tomorrow*. We are always doing that, and we do not reach the high destination God plans for us.

Let us think of Christ steadfastly striding forward to embrace the Cross. It was the plan of God that he suffer and so enter his glory. It was always *now*! It was never tomorrow! Whatever was the will of his heavenly Father, he chose to do *now*. Let us live *now* in the way we shall have wished to live when we appear before God. Let us so live that the present truly serves for eternity. There is only the present duty, and any thought of a future opportunity may be premature. All we have is what is *now*. We cannot count on tomorrow. Let us do our duty now. Let it not be, *cras* - tomorrow, but *nunc* - now!

A Second Reflection (Luke 9:51-56)

Resolute in Our God-given Work *"As the time drew near for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely took the road for Jerusalem."* (Luke 9:51). Jerusalem was the place of his coming Passion and Death. All our life the day is drawing ever nearer when we will, as we devoutly hope, be taken up to heaven. Life for the Christian is an advance to that day, and the meaning of death is our meeting with Christ in heaven. Our Lord was aware that the time for him to be taken

up to heaven was drawing near. So also we, in union with Christ, ought be aware of this. Having this in mind we should, like our Lord, be resolute as he was resolute. We should be resolute in following the path that God has laid out for us which leads to our meeting with Christ in heaven.

That path is the energetic and loving fulfilment of our daily duties and responsibilities, in a word, of our work in life, in the broadest sense of the word. It could even be a particular train of sufferings such as illness or some great misfortune. As St Bernadette Soubirous began her last illness, she described it as her final "job." Whatever our work is, we must use our time profitably in union with our Lord who resolutely took his path to the end, and thus saved the world.



Wednesday of the Twenty-sixth Week in Ordinary Time

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Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Job 9:1-12.14-16; Psalm 87; Luke 9:57-62

As they were walking along the road, a man said to Jesus, I will follow you wherever you go. Jesus replied, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. He said to another man, Follow me. But the man replied, Lord, first let me

go and bury my father. Jesus said to him, Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Still another said, I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family. Jesus replied, No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. (Luke 9:57-62)

Follow Him One of the very good advances in tertiary education of recent times is in the study of religion. In, say, the middle of the twentieth century, it was not easy in Australia (for instance) to study religion at an advanced university level. I suspect that this was because it was assumed that religion could not be regarded as an objective study in the way that philosophy could be. It was largely a matter of personal persuasion. Be that as it may, all this has changed, and one can now make a career of the study and teaching of (the phenomenon of) religion in Secondary School or University. The study of Buddhism has proliferated, for instance. But notice this – in studying Buddhism the overwhelming emphasis is on Buddhist teachings, practices and ethos. There is some study of the life and person of the Buddha

(Gautama) himself, but that study can almost be seen as a little irrelevant. The main thing is Buddhism and it is this which is contemplated and researched. Mahomet is revered highly by Islam. He is deemed to be *the* Prophet of Allah – but again, far above in importance is the *teaching* of Mahomet (as contained in the *Koran*), for it is considered to be divinely revealed. It is this which is contemplated and studied, not the person of Mahomet as such – except as one who is the prime example of living it. Buddha did not say to his disciples, *follow me wherever I go* – and give up all to follow *me*, even to crucifixion if necessary. *Learn from me* and from my qualities of heart – and so forth. No, he said, contemplate and learn my *teaching* and it will set you on the path to life and happiness. But the case is quite different with Jesus Christ. His personal claims far transcended others who gained great followings. Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte had great numbers in their train and who engaged in their adventures, but these were in large measure *corralled* and put to service. Pity help them if they opted out, even though these masterful individuals did have extraordinary leadership qualities. But the point

being made here is that Jesus Christ asks explicitly for a personal following of *him*. *He himself* is the burden and object of his teaching. He is not simply a great prophet who claims to have a revelation from God, a teaching which must be followed and if followed leads to life everlasting. His teaching is about *himself*. *He* must be loved and followed above all else and above all others. Christianity means loving and following *him*.

This is what we are led to think of by our Gospel passage today (Luke 9:57-62). *He said to another man, Follow me. But the man replied, Lord, first let me go and bury my father. Jesus said to him, Let the dead bury their own dead.* Napoleon Bonaparte, in a conversation when living out his final years on the remote island of St Helena, said that the distinctive thing about Jesus Christ was the total hold on hearts which he gained in countless cases century after century, beginning from his public ministry. There has been nothing like it in all of history, he thought, and it was beyond the power of a mere man. It was a convincing proof of his divinity. What a comment like this highlights

is that the essence of Christianity is the contemplation and love and following of the person of Jesus Christ – not just his “teaching”. You will not understand Christianity if you are not very interested in the person of Jesus Christ, whereas you can understand Buddhism even if you are not interested in Gautama. You can be absolutely fascinated all your life in Aristotle’s teaching, while never having much interest in Aristotle. All this brings us to the next very important point, that the disciple of Christ (and every member of the Church should strive to be a true disciple of Christ) must daily *contemplate* the person of Jesus Christ. Our heart must be centered on him. Our lives must be characterized and driven by a full love for him. When Christ was asked what was the principal commandment of the divine law he said that it was to love God with all one’s mind, heart, soul and strength. This is what he expects *for himself* from us, and the reason is quite plain. He is no mere man – though he is man. He is God, just as much God as is the Father for he is the Father’s divine Son. But now, how are we to grow in this love for Jesus Christ, which is the essence of the Christian life? First of all, it is the work of divine grace because we

are asking how we are to grow in the love of God. So we must have constant access to the grace of God, which is made available to us especially in the Sacraments. So, having received the Sacrament of Baptism (and Confirmation) we should frequent the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist. But then there must be an assiduous life of prayer going on – and by this I mean a daily intercourse with the person of Christ. We must not become tired of prayer, even though the nature of our prayer will change as time goes on. We must strive to live constantly in the presence of Jesus Christ as our Saviour and our God.

Let us be specific about this. Every day, upon rising raise the mind and heart immediately to prayer to Jesus Christ, to the Father and to the Holy Spirit. Let one's prayer be also to the "cloud of witnesses" who surround us – Mary, the Angels, and perhaps some favourite saints. Offer up the day to him in company with Mary his mother. Throughout the day, raise the mind and heart to Christ, renewing one's intention of doing all things for him. Do a little spiritual reading some time during the day. If possible, visit the

Eucharistic Jesus who abides in the Tabernacle of the nearby Catholic Church. If it is possible, get to Mass that day, and if not make a spiritual communion with Christ at that Mass and in the Tabernacle. Get to the Sacrament of Penance frequently. Have the holy ambition to love Jesus with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.



Thursday of the Twenty-sixth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Dan 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Job 19:21-27; Psalm 26; Luke 10:1-12

After this the Lord appointed seventy two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest

field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.' But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.' I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. (Luke 10: 1-12)

The Seventy-two The most obvious point we are led to think of in our Gospel passage today is the spread of the Christian faith. Faith in Jesus Christ began to spread as soon as Jesus Christ made his public appearance. The first to "have faith in Jesus Christ" was John the

Baptist. He was made aware that here was the promised One. He distinctly says that he had not known this, but was made aware of it by the One who sent him to baptize (John 1:33). Because of his testimony, Christ gained his first disciples (John 1: 36-39). They were among his very best, and these led to others (1: 40-51). Thus the faith began to spread, but let us notice that there was what we might call a divinely intended channel of this initial evangelization. By that I mean that John the Baptist was a formally constituted prophet of God, and he announced that Jesus was the Messiah. Christ's first disciples were gained because of a prophetic testimony. It was not just a movement of faith that spontaneously arose, and then happened to have fortunate results. In our Gospel today we see that Christ did not simply leave the spread of faith in him – on which he put so much store – to the chance development of a movement of interest in him. He selected and appointed a specific number of his disciples to go ahead of him in pairs, *"to every town and place where he was about to go."* This appointment was a purely temporary structure serving as the engine of the spread of the faith, but it reminds us of a pattern. A permanent system for the

spread of the faith would soon come. From among his disciples Christ appointed twelve who would be with him and who would share in his ministry. Among them, he appointed one, Simon, who would be the "Rock" (*Petros*, Peter) on which he would build his "Church." To him, this Rock, he gave the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and with these keys Simon would open and close, bind and loose. The Church would be impregnable against Satan, and its task would be to spread the faith.

The spread of faith in Jesus Christ, which is at the heart of our redemption and sanctification, was not simply left to a chance movement of interested parties, a movement that happened to fall on its feet and gain tremendous momentum. It was the formal mission of a divinely-established institution with its definite structure. At the same time, however, there is no suggestion in the New Testament that, say, the appointment of those seventy-two was permanent. It seems to have been *ad hoc* and designed for the occasion. This itself reminds us that the spread of faith in Christ by the Church is not just the work of those who are part of its higher formal structure. So, while in one sense the

seventy-two remind us of the structured character of the Church's nature and mission, in a different sense they also remind us that this same mission is dependent on those who are what we might call the ordinary members. It is generally recognized that the triumph of the Christian religion in the Roman Empire was in large measure due to the witness given by the ordinary members. These members discovered Christ, gave their lives to him, continued on living in their families and in the midst of their ordinary communities doing their daily work, and bearing witness to Christ there in that setting. In times of persecution they suffered martyrdom. The Christian religion was a grassroots spread. Because of this manifest fact, some scholars have reduced the Christian religion to a mere movement. No. Rather, it embraced and involved a movement of witness but was not a mere movement. Those who bore witness to Jesus were part of Christ's Church. In them, wherever they were, Christ's Church was evangelizing the world, and in the Church, wherever it was, the Holy Spirit was evangelizing the nations. Let the seventy-two of today's Gospel symbolize all classes of vocation within Christ's Church. All are sent to evangelize the

world. Some do so by professional vocation. Others do so within the setting of their ordinary workaday and family lives. All are called to holiness and to mission.

I like to think of the three whom the Gospels tell us were especially loved by our Lord. They were Martha, Mary and Lazarus. We do not read of them travelling with our Lord on mission in Galilee and Judea. But they loved him dearly, and had a magnificent faith in him – as we see from Martha's words to Jesus when he arrived at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11: 27). They would have been a powerful witness to him in their everyday setting, both before and after the Resurrection. There was another who was especially loved by our Lord – the "beloved disciple," John. He was one of the Twelve, a pillar of the infant Church (as St Paul calls him). All the disciples of Christ have the calling to love him with all their hearts, and to bear witness to him before others. Let us all do this, then!

A Second Reflection: (Luke 10:1-12)

Jesus Sending Out His Disciples Very many people lead a fairly aimless life, which is to say a life with little sense of purpose. They kill time. Others have aims, but they are of little value. There are others who are burdened with worries that are of little consequence, while others have tremendous worries of real consequence. Christ our Lord has given each and every one of his disciples a great aim that ought fill their lives: to be his disciples totally and from the heart, and to be apostolic in life as well. *"The Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them out ahead of him in pairs to all the towns and places he himself was to visit."* What value our lives will have, if we have prepared the way for people to accept our Lord, be they members of our family, our workplace, our parish, or wherever!

There are so many things which preoccupy us and distract us from this great work. Let us resolve to work on being detached from

whatever can hinder us from loving Christ and collaborating with him in his work. Let us accept from God, no matter how painful it is, his work of purifying us from all such attachments, and let us live for the work which Jesus has given us to do for him.



Friday of the Twenty-sixth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Dan 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Job 38: 1.12-21;40:3-5; Psalm 138; Luke 10:13-16

Jesus said to them, "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the

judgment than for you. And as for you, Capernaum, 'Will you be exalted to heaven? You will go down to the netherworld.' Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me." (Luke 10:13-16)

Near Yet Far One can be very near to God (as his creature), and yet very far indeed from him (in sin). One of the most terrible things about deliberate sin is that, in a sense, the creature, in sinning, drags the Creator into a kind of association with it. In everything, the creature depends on the all-holy, all-powerful Creator. Every element of our being and all our action is radically dependent on the Creator for its existence. Were there not to be that ontological support constantly coming from God, the creature would instantly cease to be. I can only think because the Creator sustains me precisely as I think. At every moment of my existence I am in an *intimate proximity* with my Creator because I depend absolutely and radically on his creative act. This means that God is sustaining me as I do his will, and he is sustaining me when I contravene it. He has given me the gift of existence and of life,

and when I abuse this by engaging in thoughts, words or deeds that are profoundly offensive to him, indeed that are a horror to him because of their moral evil, he does not withdraw that gift of being. He continues to offer it by his intent that I live and exist. He is closer to me than I am to myself when I am doing things that deeply offend his infinite holiness. He sees all, even when what he sees disgusts him. He sustains me as I neglect and despise him by my action. When we sin, we sin in the intimate presence of our Creator. A great motive for not sinning is to maintain a sense of the presence of God always. When we sin, we are very near to God while being very far from him. The first sin that was ever committed was an enormity – and it was committed in the presence of God in all his infinite glory. Lucifer rebelled, and many angels with him. They refused to serve – though the precise nature of the sin is disputed – and this, despite their being in the presence of God himself. So they were cast out, never to return. Even in hell, the demons are close to God because God sustains them in existence. Close to him, they hate him and are far from him.

It is the same when Jesus Christ came among men. Though near to him, they could be very far from him. He grew up in the village of Nazareth, and we remember that he returned to his home town during his public ministry, with the fame of a prophet great in word and works. He announced to them that he was the Messiah, and warned that they were likely to reject him. This they forthwith did. They rejected him, and even strove to kill him. These were people with whom he had been raised, with whom he worked and associated for thirty years. They had been very close to him, and they proved in the event to be very far from him. Being in the presence of God does not necessarily mean being close to him. Expelled from his home town of Nazareth, our Lord moved to Capernaum which would serve as a base in his public ministry beyond. In our Gospel passage today (Luke 10:13-16) we see our Lord condemning the people of Capernaum, with whom he was living, to whom he returned for respite during his public ministry, and for whom he worked miracles and preached. *"And as for you, Capernaum, 'Will you be exalted to heaven? You will go down to the netherworld.'"* They were physically near to our Lord, but far from

him in their hearts. The most obvious and famous of such persons was Judas Iscariot. He was a follower of Jesus Christ, and chosen among other followers to be one of the elite Twelve. He was privileged to be part of the "inner sanctum" of Christ's circle and friendship, with the inestimable honour of sharing in his all-important redemptive work. He could have become a great saint. His feast-day could have been celebrated annually in the Church's Liturgical Year till the end of time. He was very near to Jesus Christ and literally lived in his presence. But he fell away into the most monstrous of sins. He betrayed his God for a handful of silver. He was close to Jesus Christ, but far from him. He allowed his faults to destroy his relationship with the God who had chosen him to be near to him and to share in his work.

By the gift of life and being, we have *ipso facto* been placed in the undying presence of God. By our Baptism and by the reception of the Sacraments we share in God's life as his adopted children. He has placed us very close to him. We ought ask ourselves, What am I doing about this? Am I drifting along in this relationship which he, my

Creator, has established for me? In fact, though close to him, I may be far from him because of sin. Let us resolve to build on what God has so mercifully done, and work to establish an undying intimacy with the God who loves us with his infinite love.

A Second Reflection: (Job 38)

The Sufferings of Job One of the great steps forward in human history was the rise of science. Science has been one of the principal factors in the shaping of modern man — and with the new knowledge that science has brought. There are great breakthroughs flowing from our knowledge of the atom. Unexpected information is on the horizon. What this also shows is that there is so little that we know of what God has created for our benefit. By implication, God's knowledge is unimaginably vast, while ours is so poor. This consideration ought help us in dealing with a problem that has perennially afflicted man, a problem that is very close to him: the problem of evil, especially the evil and suffering that appears to be undeserved. Job could not understand how it was that he suffered so much when he knew that he

did not deserve it. God's answer comes at the end, in Chapter 38. He reminds Job that there is so much in the world that he (Job) does not understand. But God does — so there is a reason for what God permits. So too there is a reason for the suffering of the just man.

With the coming of Christ, suffering would be transformed, and given a purpose beyond imagining.



Saturday of the Twenty-sixth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Dan 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Job 42:1-3.5-6.12-16; Psalm 118; Luke 10:17-24

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name. He replied, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will

harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven. At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No-one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no-one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Luke 10:17-24)

The Struggle Let us notice how our Lord describes the *arena* of his disciples' mission. He has sent out seventy-two of his disciples – we are not here referring to that altogether special band, the Twelve. They were to be the *foundation stones* of his Church. Their head, Simon, was in a special sense the *rock* on which it would be built. Perhaps we

could regard the seventy-two as broadly representing the rest of Christ's Church and sharing in his mission according to their calling. Be all that as it may, off they had gone and now they return telling the Lord of their experience. When united with Jesus by acting in his name, they were victorious over the demons. That is the experience which Christ deigned to give them. But the interest here is the terms in which our Lord goes on to describe the *arena* in which his mission is to be prosecuted. The arena is one of a *battlefield*, in which there is a powerful enemy to be faced. The disciples discovered with joy on this excursion that they easily overcame the demons. *The seventy-two returned with joy and said, Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.* That would not guarantee that the fight would be so easy in every instance and circumstance in the future. Their experience of success over the demons in this initial flush was surely, in part, an educational exercise. It encouraged them on and told them first-hand of the power of Jesus Christ and the result of operating in his name. The mission involved a fight, a battle, a locking of horns against a considerable opponent wholly bent on evil. This daunting fact is

normally out of sight and can, in our secular age, be thought to be a phantom. I very clearly remember how, over forty years ago, the declaration of (Blessed) Paul VI that the “smoke of Satan” had appeared in the life of the Church was reported. The Pope was referring to the dissent that was becoming rampant. I vividly recall the newsreader on ABC TV news – he read his news text with a suppressed grin, as if the papal mention of the devil was a bit of a joke. The newsreader was, of course, reflecting the spiritual blindness of a secular society. But Jesus Christ makes it clear in our passage what are the issues. The issue is the confrontation between God and Satan. The Good News is that God (in the person of Christ) reveals that victory is a foregone conclusion. So we must join with him.

One of the great spiritual manuals of the Church’s history is the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola. There is a very important Meditation in that manual called “The Two Standards”. The whole *arena* is dominated by two forces facing one another in battle array – each with its Standard. There is the Standard of Christ and there is the

Standard of Satan. The one making the retreat is asked to contemplate this scene and to make a definitive decision to join Jesus Christ and to adopt his weapons. Victory will follow, and it is those – the little ones – who are docile to Jesus Christ who will win the field. The point is that we must be clear as to what is really going on. The Book of Revelation describes the situation in no uncertain terms. The first figure on the scene is that of the “*woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child*” (12:1-2). And what is the second figure? It is that of the Dragon – “*a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems upon his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman ... that he might devour her child*” (12:3-4). So we have on the one hand the Incarnate Son of God and the Woman (his mother and the Church), and on the other Satan and all the “stars” (the demons) he brought down with him. There is a titanic battle going on, and it is no pushover. We just have to think of God the Son made man dead on the cross to see what the struggle to atone for the sin of the world cost. But

this was precisely the weapon God took up to defeat the Dragon. It is the weapon of the Cross, of obedient suffering, of humility and meekness, of witnessing to the truth. With this, the days of the Dragon are numbered. And so we read in the same chapter of Revelation that *“war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him”* (12: 7-9). Victory is assured for those who are with the Child and the Woman (Mary and the Church).

All this brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 10: 17-24) and the words of Jesus Christ. Jesus *replied, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but*

rejoice that your names are written in heaven. It is a victory open to the little ones. At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. Let us understand very clearly what life is all about. It is about the struggle between good and evil, holiness and sin, led by Christ our Lord and opposed by the Serpent. We can be assured of victory, victory forever, if we take our stand with Jesus and fight with him.



Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Esther 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; Psalm 94;
 2 Timothy 1: 6-8.13-14; Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." The Lord replied, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey

you. "Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here immediately and take your place at table'? Would he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You may eat and drink when I am finished'? Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded? So should it be with you. When you have done all you have been commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.'"
(Luke 17:5-10)

Grace and Merit In today's second reading (2 Timothy 1: 6-8.13-14), St Paul refers to God's gift to Timothy. *"I am reminding you"*, he writes to Timothy, *"to fan into a flame the gift that God gave you."* He then speaks more of the gift. He exhorts Timothy to bear the hardships of his vocation, *"relying on the power of God."* Then at the end of the passage he tells Timothy to guard the teaching *"with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us."* Timothy, then, is to enliven the gift of God by relying on the power of God and the help of the Holy

Spirit. That is to say, he is to rely on the grace of God. Our being made right in the sight of God, our salvation and our sanctification, the fulfilment of our calling from God, all depend on God's gift of grace. In our Gospel passage (Luke 17: 5-10), the apostles ask our Lord to "*Increase our faith.*" This gift of an increase of faith is a gift of God's grace. At the moment of the Incarnation, the Angel addressed Mary as one who was full of grace. Her habitual state was that of being full of grace. Grace is our need and our glory. It is God's redeeming and sanctifying favour, and it makes us new. It is the gratuitous gift that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it. In the first instance, it is the sanctifying or deifying grace received in baptism, and is the source of our ongoing sanctification. It disposes the soul to live habitually with God and to act by his love. It is also the source of particular helps by God to assist the soul to progress towards him, beyond the grace of an habitual share in his life. These further graces answer to particular spiritual needs of our actual situation. When we ask for the grace of God, as we should do repeatedly, we are asking for God's abiding

favour as well as the special sanctifying helps that arise from this habitual share in his life. When the apostles asked our Lord to increase their faith, they were asking for his help for a special spiritual need. They sought the actual grace of light and prayer. At Pentecost, the grace of God came granting them an habitual share in his life, and the actual graces empowering them to believe and bear witness to him.

So then, when we live habitually in the state of grace, this grace places us in habitual communion with God. In terms of its effect, this habitual grace sanctifies us, and in this sense is called sanctifying grace. It is an habitual action of God, at work in our Baptism and in the various Sacraments, maintaining us in this filial relationship with him. It also opens us to the many actual graces that God gives us in the course of our path of growing communion with him. Grace, whether habitual or actual, is first and foremost the gift of the Holy Spirit who justifies and sanctifies us in an ongoing sense and by particular interventions. God's favour or grace also includes the gifts that the Spirit grants to associate us with his work. This grace accompanies us

in our work and makes it fruitful. Various graces of state enable us to exercise our responsibilities. So we should pray for all the graces we need. We ought pray that God will preserve us in the state of grace; that he will grant us abundant actual graces so that we may grow in his friendship; that he will grant us all the graces we need to fulfil our duties; in a word, we ought pray for all the grace we need both now and at the hour of our death. The *Hail Mary* is a beautiful prayer because in it we invoke the intercession of the mother of Christ for all our needs now and at the hour of our death. It has been said that the work of personal sanctity depends 99% on the grace of God and 1% on our own efforts. But that 1% symbolises everything we have, our entire effort of cooperating with the grace of God. We will even need God's grace to put in that 1% that is our own. If we put in that effort every day, we will merit eternal life, and this will be due to the goodness and grace of God. It is something which, by his grace, we will merit. The saints go to God with great merits, all due to God's grace. For this reason our Lord said that to the one who has will be given more, and the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away from him. So we must

ask God for his grace, and then by our active and generous cooperation with that help he gives, merit by our divinely supported efforts his further friendship.

Let us then take up and pursue the work of our sanctification and the work of the apostolate, constantly asking for God's grace to do it. A good grace to ask for would be that which the disciples asked for in our Gospel passage today: "*Increase our faith*" (Luke 17:5).

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1996 2016
(Grace and Merit)

A Second Reflection: Luke 17:5-10

Faith The upright man, God tells us in the first reading, lives by his faith (Habakkuk 1:2-3.2:2-4). That is a key to how to live: *by faith*. The prophet's message was, in summary, that whatever evils might strike, the person of faith will emerge victorious. St John in one of his Letters writes that this is the victory over the world, our *faith*. It is often said that the evils of the world are the obstacle to belief in

God. But the scriptures tell us that belief in God gives us the victory over the world. This faith in God involves faith in One who is almighty, and so to believe in God is to believe also in his power. It is so often this which we do not believe. We do not really believe that God is all-powerful. We tend to think, without admitting it, that God is just one powerful reality among many, and that, therefore, there is a limit to his power, which is to say, a limit to the degree to which we can depend on him alone. Ultimately we tend not to be very different from those who believed in many gods, none of whom were all-powerful. There is also this. A real reliance on God's power is crucial to the spiritual and apostolic life. For notice what St Paul says in the second reading: *"So you are never to be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord, but with me bear the hardships for the sake of the Gospel, relying on the power of God"* (2 Timothy 1:6-8.13-14). Relying on the power of God, having faith in God who is all-powerful, enables us to bear the hardships involved in living the Christian life and bearing witness to the Lord. We are all called to be holy, to be saints, full of love in the sight of God. It is our faith that is the foundation of this programme. It gives

us the victory. All this enables us to appreciate the request of the apostles in the Gospel (Luke 17:5-10). "Increase our faith," they said to our Lord.

Our Lord immediately takes advantage of the request of his disciples to stress the power of faith: it can move mountains, the real mountains which are unbelief and sin. Our Lord puts his point in figurative language: "*Were your faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.*" Can we imagine uprooting a tree by a word and having it plant itself in the sea, of all places? Of course our Lord was making his point with colourful and figurative hyperbole. He was saying that if we have a strong faith in almighty God, *God's will*, which might seem impossible, will be seen to be very possible. And what is the will of God? *This is the will of God*, St Paul says in one of his Letters, *your sanctification*. That is the real mountain. That is the miracle God wants to work, and every day he himself is at that work by his grace, but he asks our cooperation. Fundamental to our cooperation

is having a true faith in him. We must believe in him as we set out each day to do his will, which is to act in mind, in heart, in word and in deed in such a way as to please him. On one occasion our Lord was asked to work a miracle. He responded, "*unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe!*" And the person replied, "*Lord, I do believe, but help my unbelief!*" Our Lord wants us to believe on the authority of his word as it comes to us in the teaching, the preaching and the ministry of his Church. St John tells us at the end of his Gospel how Thomas, when he saw the risen Christ and felt his wounds, said, *My Lord and My God!* Our Lord replied, "*You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*" We will, then, be blessed if we believe even if we have not seen the miracles and supportive evidence of our Lord's power. And the supreme blessing will be our sanctification.

Each one of us has been called to be holy and full of love in God's sight. This is our work in life, but above all it is God's work, the work of his love and his power. In this work and power of God we

must have faith. Our faith will lead us to the Sacraments, to Mass, to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, to frequent Confession, to a constantly docile and receptive attitude to the Church's teaching and guidance, to trust in God when it becomes difficult to keep his commandments. Our faith gives us the victory. "*Lord I do believe. Help my unbelief!*" Let us then pray for a deep faith and for grace to live by it.



Monday of the Twenty-seventh Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Esther 4:17

Within your will, O Lord, all

things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect

Almighty ever-living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 1:13-24; Psalm 138; Luke 10:25-37

There was a scholar of the law who stood up to test Jesus and said, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" He said in reply, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your

being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself." He replied to him, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live." But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Jesus replied, "A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveller who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn, and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, 'Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.' Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbour to the robbers' victim?" He answered, "The one who treated

him with mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:25-37)

Charity One of the most interesting aspects of nineteenth-century British culture was its religious thought. Another was its anti-religious thought, which is to say its growing agnosticism and practical atheism. Still another was the concern for the working class. An example of one who combined anti-religious thought with concern for the working class was Friedrich Engels (1820 - 1895). Engels was a German social scientist, author, political theorist, philosopher, and father of communist theory, alongside Karl Marx. In 1842, the 22 year-old Engels was sent to Manchester in Britain to work for the textile firm of Ermen and Engels in which his father was a shareholder. During his time in Manchester, Engels took notes of the horrors he observed there, notably child labour, the despoiled environment, and overworked and impoverished labourers. Two years after arriving he published his first, and perhaps most famous book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, considered by many to be a classic account of the

condition of the industrial working class. Originally written in German as *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse*, in England it was a landmark book by the man who went on to collaborate deeply with Karl Marx. Together they issued the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, among other things dismissing religion as a mere opiate of the people. Of course, their concern for those in need – for the man half-dead on the road to Jericho – had in it the seeds of the Leninist, Stalinist and Maoist horrors of the 20th century. But the point is that Engels exemplifies a concern for those in need that had no concern for God. On the other hand, there was the man of religion who exhibited little or no concern for those in need. The reader of the Gospels gets the impression that this was one of the severe criticisms Jesus Christ levelled at many of the religious leaders of his day. In our Gospel today, in response to a question by an expert in the Law, our Lord tells his parable of the Good Samaritan. In the story, the *priest* and the *Levite* pass by the man who was half-dead on the road, while the heretical foreigner takes pity on him and nurses him to health.

To a greater or lesser extent, there are two opposite dangers in respect to those in need. On the one hand, there is the danger of being filled with concern for the poor and downtrodden, while being unconcerned for God – and even rejecting God. There are very many examples in history of this, leading ultimately to further misery. Marx and Engels offer a classic case. On the other hand, there is the danger of assiduously practising a religion that lacks concern for those in need and difficulty. This is not the religion that is pleasing to God. The prophets thundered against a religion of sacrifices and oblations, coupled with injustice and lack of compassion for the poor. Our Lord's famous parable today features the iconic example of one who was a better man in God's sight, and who fulfilled God's will and Law in a much better fashion, than certain religious leaders. The Good Samaritan is the man who assists the poor and needy, and who has the praise of Christ. Incidentally, the Good Samaritan of our Lord's story certainly was not an atheist. He was, at most, a holder of heretical opinions. Samaritans looked to Abraham and to the patriarchs, and expected, as we see in the words of the Samaritan woman to Christ, the

coming of the Messiah. Christ regarded them kindly; he spoke to them respectfully – as we see in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman. He gained converts from them during his public ministry, for we read that following his success with the Samaritan woman, many of them came to believe that he was “the Saviour of the world”. In our Gospel passage today (Luke 10:25-37), he holds up a Samaritan for imitation by the religious leaders of the Jews: “*Go and do likewise*,” he said to the Jewish expert in God's Law. Christ may have seen in some Samaritans very estimable qualities. On one occasion he healed ten lepers, and it was a Samaritan who returned to him to render him profuse thanks. The others did not. In our story, it is the overflowing compassion of the Samaritan which exemplifies the Law of God that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves.

One of the greatest, though hidden, English Catholics of the eighteenth century was Richard Challoner, Vicar Apostolic of the London District. During his ninetieth year (1781) he suffered a stroke. His last word was “Charity.” He wanted some money in his

pocket to be given to the poor. Let us work on this — practical charity to those in need. In serving them, we serve Christ himself. So fundamental is this prescription that in our Lord's description of the General Judgment, our treatment of those in need, especially the least, will be decisive in our eternal prospects. I was hungry, the judge will answer, and you gave me to eat. Lord, when did we see you hungry? The Judge will answer, *I tell you, whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me.*

A Second Reflection:

Fidelity to the Gospel The notable feature of the Christian religion is, of course, that it claims to be a divine revelation. We accept its truth and base our lives on it because it comes from God. The Church teaches this, and has the authority from Christ to interpret what God has revealed. St Paul makes this point in one of his Letters: what he, Paul, taught, came from Christ, and he, Paul, is the authentic interpreter of what Christ revealed to him. Paul also states that there is a proneness among many who have received the message of the Gospel to turn away

from it and follow a different version of it. St Paul was astonished at the promptness with which some of the Galatians did this (Galatians 1: 6-12). And we find this repeated in the history of the Church.

Let us resolve to treasure what the Church teaches and the authority with which she teaches it, bearing witness before others to this resolve never to turn away to another version of the Good News.



Tuesday of the Twenty-seventh Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Esther 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 1:13-24; Psalm 138; Luke 10:38-42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be

made. She came to him and asked, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me! Martha, Martha, the Lord answered, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:38-42)

One Thing Necessary I once listened to a parish teacher of religion in a local state primary school – she had a class of children once a week – and she made an interesting remark. She said that if the children of a class are always very good, the class is boring for her. She relished some difficulty, as that difficulty forced her to strive to give her best to the work. Consider the most interesting biographies or novels. Generally they portray some grand and difficult undertaking, calling for the best efforts in the protagonists who are involved in the drama. It could be some family saga, struggling against difficulties in the generations of the family, and finally overcoming or being overcome. One of the National Days of Australia is Anzac Day, commemorating all those fallen in war. Anzac Day was originally the

commemoration of a military defeat, when the Australians attacked and were defeated by the defending Turks at Gallipoli. It was the drama and heroism of that struggle that was celebrated – and the Day now celebrates *all* who give their lives in defence of their country at war. Great movies have been made of outstanding singers such as Enrico Caruso (1873-1921), brilliant musical composers such as Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin (1810-1849), and numerous others from various walks of life. What makes their lives enthralling is the *struggle* to reach the heights of achievement. Now, what this intimates is that it is work and struggle that gives to life its grandeur, its heroism and its satisfaction. A life of ease will not bring happiness and fulfilment – this we sense even naturally, without any recourse to Revelation. Granted this, the great question is, however, what am I to dedicate my best energies to? What should I struggle *for*? There is the story of the fast moving passenger vehicle, and the passengers heard an announcement by the driver which said that they were making extremely good time, but that he had no idea *where* he was going. They were scarcely reassured. So then, life is too short to be frittered away. On all hands it

is agreed that life ought be filled with dedication, but the question is, dedication to *what*?

Our Gospel passage today (Luke 10:38-42) gives us the gentle scene of Christ being received into the home of Martha and Mary, the sisters of the Lazarus whom our Lord would raise from the dead not long before his own death and resurrection. There he sits, and Mary is at his feet listening with rapt attention to his words. Imagine being in that situation! Imagine gazing on the face of Jesus Christ, Lord, God and Redeemer of the world, fount of all knowledge and wisdom, image of the Father! He speaks with exquisite simplicity and wisdom, filling the soul of Mary with light and love. Her sister Martha, with so much love for Jesus Christ, filled with faith in his Person and his powers (as we read on the occasion of the raising of her brother Lazarus), is attending to the business of hospitality for her beloved Master. Martha would in due course be celebrated every year as a saint of the Church. But she is irritated at the sight of her sister who is oblivious of what needs to be done – and perhaps there were some of the Twelve

around to be prepared for too. So she boldly comes to our Lord and asks him to get her sister moving. Ah! That is not what our Lord himself wishes at that point. Indeed, he makes a memorable point that was duly noted by the assiduous Luke, a point to be borne in mind by all of Christ's busy disciples. All must guard their hearts and direct them to *the one thing necessary*. The one thing necessary is to do God's will. Elsewhere our Lord had summarized that command – it was to love God with all one's heart, and one's neighbour as oneself. The one thing necessary is to keep the gaze of the heart on Jesus Christ, to hear his word with attention, and to put it into practice. It is simply said, but enormous in difficulty. Personal sanctity is the greatest of all human undertakings. The pursuit of holiness is the one thing necessary, and there is but limited time to attain it. The goal ought be to attain it that very day – because we cannot count on tomorrow. Everything we do ought be what God wants us to do, and done with as much love for God as our heart can attain. That is the work of today, and tomorrow and each day. It is the one thing necessary, and it is a mighty work. It is *this* for which we ought constantly *struggle*.

The drama of life is the drama of attaining to the goodness and holiness which God plans for us. We can be good or bad. The former requires that we enter by the narrow door, the latter is the broad way that lead to destruction. Life and death are the ominous alternatives, and we must seek the one thing necessary. Let us stop, truly stop, and ponder what we wish it to be. We must ponder the goal of life, and not just keep speeding ahead, without considering the one thing necessary. The one thing necessary is that we love, serve and obey God in Christ, and extricate our hearts from all that takes us away from him. This is done in the ordinary duties of every day.

A Second Reflection (Luke 10:38-42)

The One Thing Necessary What a beautiful scene we have described for us in Luke 10: 38-42. Our Lord, our God and Creator, is welcomed into the house of Martha and Mary. There he sits talking with them, he their God and they his creatures! He talks to them as friends. We have Martha even complaining to him about the way he tolerates the inaction of her sister. The whole thing is a manifestation of the Incarnation, of

God becoming flesh and making his dwelling among men. This shows forth the wonderful accessibility and approachability of God our Creator. God is revealed as One we can approach very simply and with confidence, One who honours us by wanting our friendship. Indeed, our Lord makes it clear in this scene that this is the one thing necessary — that we approach him and sit at his feet listening as did Mary to his word. Martha was worrying and fretting "*about so many things, yet few are needed, indeed only one.*" She was allowing her service of the Lord to distract her heart from the one thing necessary.

Let us relish the presence and the friendship of God in all that we do for him. In all our service of him, let us make him the object of our heart's desire.



Wednesday of the Twenty-seventh Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Esther 4:17

Within your will, O Lord, all

things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

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Scripture today: Galatians 2:1-2. 7-14; Psalm 116; Luke 11:1-4

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples. He said to them, When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily

bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.' (Luke 11:1-4)

Lord's Prayer

Every saint is extraordinary, not for any extraordinary things he may do, but for the extraordinarily holy way he does the normally ordinary things. That said, one of the extraordinary saints of the nineteenth century was a parish priest in the backwater village of Ars, in France. Jean-Marie Vianney, known popularly as the Cure of Ars, had a striking range of charisms as a parish priest. He could read the hearts of souls and convert sinners. His spiritual power in the Confessional was very great, but one notable feature was the way he said Mass. He was filled with prayer and with God during his celebration of Mass. It was manifest to observers that he was in communication with God in his prayer. Now, however striking the spiritual life and the prayer of a particular saint, that saint merely reflects to a point the spiritual life of Jesus Christ. He but shares in the Spirit of Jesus, and Jesus Christ far outstrips him because he, Jesus, is the Son of God. To behold the Cure of Ars at prayer and celebrating

Mass was a most moving experience, but what must it have been to see Jesus Christ at prayer with his heavenly Father! Imagine Christ communing in prayer with his heavenly Father – Father and Son in converse with one another. This is what our Lord's disciples observed. They lived with him, travelled with him, heard him, spoke with him, dined with him, and in general observed him more closely than anyone else had, with the exception of his own most holy mother and his foster-father, at Nazareth. The Twelve came to know Jesus Christ as few others ever could – this was their privilege and their responsibility. How great the responsibility of Judas in falling away from the personal friendship of Christ - not only a responsibility for his own salvation, but a responsibility for the vocation as an Apostle that was granted to him! The disciples observed Christ at prayer and wanted to learn. In our Gospel passage today (Luke 11: 1-4) we read that *"One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."* There was no master of prayer like Jesus Christ.

Yes, Christ is the peerless master of prayer. But notice how simple, brief, and seemingly ordinary the prayer is that he taught his disciples to say. In Luke's version of it, briefer than Matthew's, it lasts a mere three verses. It is strikingly simple and brief. There are many much longer prayers in the Scriptures – the average psalm would be longer, and Christ's prayer at the Last Supper is much longer. It clearly shows that our Lord's own prayer was simple, and that he wishes our prayer to be simple, too. In fact, so brief and simple is it that it easily leads to prayer that is wordless. The Lord's Prayer suggests that the principal component of prayer is not many words, but the intent that informs them. The words ought be heartfelt, expressing the heart's sigh and yearning, borne along by the Spirit of Jesus Christ who prays from within us. If this is the prayer that our Redeemer taught us to use in our converse with God our Father, then the elements that make it up are calculated to encompass all our needs. How simple the prayer! *"Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation"* (Luke

11: 1-4). The first thing we pray for, reflecting the earnest desire of our Lord himself, is that God will be honoured and glorified. Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. This will happen the more Jesus Christ is accepted as Lord of lords and King of kings. *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*, he told his disciples. That authority is being wielded in order to bring all things to the feet of God our Father, and at the end, God will be all in all. For this we pray, at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer. The kingdom of God advances the more mankind enters into the friendship of Jesus Christ, and lives according to the demands of that most holy friendship. We pray for all our needs. Our greatest need is for Jesus Christ, and so our true bread is the Holy Eucharist, the bread of heaven and the bread of life, his body and blood. We pray for forgiveness and the grace to forgive all those who have injured us. Finally we pray to be kept from sin.

Let us love the Lord's Prayer, and never let it become a prayer of rote or routine. We could not do better than die with this prayer on our lips, together with the Hail Mary, and the Glory be to the Father

prayer. The Lord's Prayer was, I think, the last prayer on the lips of Pope Paul VI, now beatified and whose Canonization will come. Jesus Christ is our model of prayer and he is our master who teaches us how to pray. Furthermore, and most importantly, he gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit, who enables us to pray and to share in the prayer of Jesus Christ. *Pray, then!*

A Second Reflection: (Luke 11:1-4)

Lord, Teach Us To Pray It ought be fairly obvious that it is extremely difficult to be saved if one does not pray, and impossible if one refuses to pray. The purpose of life is to know, love and serve God here on earth, and how could we do this if we do not pray? Moreover, if we are to advance in the knowledge and love of God, we must advance in our life of prayer. But there is a more fundamental consideration. The love of God, and the life of prayer which is its precondition, is the gift of God, the fruit of his grace. It is a blessing, a favour to be asked for. And so we can understand the request of the disciples to our Lord that he teach them to pray: "*Lord, teach us to pray,*

just as John taught his disciples.” He had been praying! Imagine how they would have gazed on the Lord at prayer, how they would have marvelled at what they saw, how they would have loved to share in his life of prayer.

All the Lord's disciples are called by their vocation to be part of his life of prayer. We are called to live in union with him in his life of prayer, and to pray with him to the Father. This is a great grace to be continually sought and requested: Lord teach me, teach us, to pray. The Lord's Prayer is Christ's answer to this request. So all our lives we ought be learning from the Lord's Prayer, and especially from that part in it which begs forgiveness and which promises to forgive others.



Thursday of the Twenty-seventh Week in Ordinary Time

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things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect

Almighty ever-living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 3:1-5; Psalm: Luke 1; Luke 11:5-13

Then Jesus said to them, Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother

me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:5-13)

Petition I remember in the year 1968 attending a lunchtime lecture at the University of Sydney given by a priest who taught in the Department of Philosophy there. His lecture was on prayer, and he gave the example of a person or group praying for rain. Soon after, rain poured down – he said that it was reasonable to suppose that the rain

was an answer to prayer. That is to say, without the prayer, it would not have rained in that way and at that point. There were many students attending the lecture, and two of the Department's professors of Philosophy also. The professors did not find the example of prayer for rain convincing. Their answer was that the arrival of the rain at that point was a mere coincidence. It was due to other factors and would have happened even if there had been no prayer of petition. The secular mind, of course, has little belief in the power of prayer. Even for the religious person, however, it can be difficult to believe that in a world governed by mighty physical and moral laws, the Creator will readily intervene to alter the course of things in response to prayer. This difficulty can increase when there seems to be no difference resulting from prayers of petition. A person who has had a stroke and is left speechless, remains speechless despite long and persistent prayer by relatives for his healing. The faith of the praying relatives may remain undimmed, but what is to be said of prayer of petition in the face of this? Cardinal Newman, beatified in September 2010, had something to say about this late in his life. In his address to the Catholic Union of

Great Britain on May 12, 1880, he observed, "*The Creator acts by a ... system of laws. ... Sometimes, indeed, he directly contradicts His own laws, as in raising the dead; but such (are) rare acts... for the most part his miracles are rather what may be called exaggerations, or carrying out to an extreme point, of the laws of Nature, than simple contrarities to them..*" He suggested, therefore, that in practice (when deciding what to pray for) we ought generally "take likely objects of prayer, not unlikely objects." That is, we must have great faith, while bearing in mind the will and plan of God.

A second point is this. Our Lord's example of the man at the door of his friend asking for three loaves of bread is an example of one with a temporal, material need being addressed. But the essential thing is that we present before God our true needs. That is to say, they ought generally be *true needs*. When the children of Israel were making their way through the wilderness on route to the promised land, they were sustained by God with what they *needed*. But they still complained. In other words, they were demanding from God *more* than they needed,

and were bitter when those requests were not granted. So, what do we really need? There are many things we have which we do not really need at all, especially when in the face of tremendous needs of people elsewhere in the world. But what is our greatest need? What does God himself want so much for us? When all is said and done, when this brief life is over (perhaps very suddenly), what will we see to have been our greatest need? Our greatest and most pressing need is *our own sanctification*. Our greatest need is that we resist and overcome temptation to do evil no matter how slight, and that we always choose what is good. This is the mightiest work in life, and the stakes are high. At any point we could be gone, gone forever, with all opportunities to be better and holier than we are, then at an end. That is the pressing need for which God has himself taken astounding steps in sending his own beloved Son to die on the Cross that we might be redeemed and sanctified. *This is the will of God*, St Paul writes, *your sanctification*. This is surely confirmed in our passage today in which our Lord, having urged us to pray for what we need, and to pray for it persistently and with confidence, reminds us that "*If you then, though*

you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"(Luke 11: 5-13). We need to do God's will in the innumerable little duties of every day. For this we need the grace of the Holy Spirit. We ought not be aiming day in and day out for the pie in the sky, but for the loving fulfilment of the duties of the day. These are the daily pennies which if collected, will make us truly rich in God's sight.

We need the help of the mighty Spirit of Christ and the Father. We need him to sustain and guide our efforts – not to replace them, but to sanctify, guide and strengthen them. If we resolutely keep our hearts directed towards the one thing necessary, appealing to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit to attain that one necessary thing, then we may, despite its difficulty, attain it. How could God refuse us his love and his grace? The great colloquy of St Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* stresses this. *Take all*, Ignatius has us say, but *give me your love and your grace*. This is what we need, and it is what God so wishes to give us. Ah! Give me your love and your grace, Lord!

A Second Reflection:

Hail Mary! Consider the honour and respect with which the angel Gabriel addressed the humble and obscure virgin Mary. She was full of grace, he said. Hail, you who are full of God's favour! Every time we pray the 'Hail Mary' we unite ourselves with all of heaven in this salutation to Mary the mother of God. Hail Mary! We repeat this constantly during our recitation of the Rosary, and on the feast day of Our Lady of the Rosary we think of her as she is addressed by the Church's members when praying the Rosary. It is obvious how highly the Church regards the Rosary, when we think of its history and the signal success that has accompanied its usage. We think of how heavily indulgenced is the recitation of the Rosary, and of how frequently and authoritatively the popes have urged this prayer on Christ's faithful. We

could also think of how our own praying of the Rosary has been blessed by special blessings and graces.

The Rosary! Let us resolve to honour Mary by frequently and devoutly praying this great prayer.

Friday of the Twenty-seventh Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Esther 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 3:7-14; Psalm 110; Luke 11:15-26

Some people said of Jesus, It is by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that he is driving out demons. Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub. Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils. He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters. When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds

the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. (Luke 11:15-26)

The One Light There have been countless students of Aristotle, dubbed by very many – including Aquinas – as “The Philosopher.” His writings range from physical science to metaphysics, and some of them are abstruse indeed. Aquinas, who writes simply, produced much that is not easily understood. Certain of his fundamental points have taken a considerable time for scholars to appreciate, such as his idea of the act of existing. Any number of philosophers and theologians have written abstrusely – and in many cases convolutedly – on subjects religious. If we set this phenomenon against the writings of the prophets, and in particular the Gospel accounts of the teachings of Jesus Christ, we see a striking difference. Christ speaks simply and on broad, fundamental points. He announces astonishing mysteries in simple language. *I and the Father are one*, he tells his enemies. *No-one can come to the Father except*

through me, he tells his disciples. *The Father is in me and I am in the Father*, he states elsewhere. He speaks of man blaspheming the Holy Spirit, and of the Spirit of Truth being our Advocate. So God is a trinity of divine Persons. *My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink*, he told the assembled people at Capernaum. *He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him*, he continued. The language of Jesus Christ is concrete, with a special predilection for analogy rather than abstraction. In this, he is squarely in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and not at all in that of, say, the Greek philosophers. However, he transcends them all in the content of his straightforward teaching of the ineffable mysteries of God and our salvation. He is the Light of the world, and the world's Redeemer. Connected with this is the range of very basic issues that feature in his teaching. For instance, it is notable how often he stresses the judgment of God, and how we must always be ready for it. We live a hair's breadth from our judgment. Very common too is his teaching on Heaven and Hell. Granted his Revelation, Christ stresses its large and obvious features. One instance of this pattern (of simple, clear

teaching on high mysteries and on basics) is given in our Gospel passage today (Luke 11:15-26).

The Gospel scene presents the despicable attempt to smear Christ with the taint of collaboration with the demonic. He was driving out demons, yes, but this was just a demonic strategy – so they said. He was in cahoots with Satan. The two were hand in glove, with Satan himself arranging to dislodge his underlings from their nests so as to enhance the prestige of Jesus who was in league with him. With this prestige, he could then lead the people astray from their proper guides, the religious leaders of the day. In answer to this gratuitous and malicious accusation, our Lord immediately showed the absurdity of such a tactic. Would any king wishing to advance his hegemony, collaborate in destroying his own strongholds? Now, in refuting his enemies, our Lord makes points about the demonic world which are revealing. Firstly, there is the broad point conceded and used by his enemies, that there is a demonic world that is very personal and very inimical to man's interests. There is Satan, and there are demons. We

forget this in our day, and characteristically we do not believe it. That is not to say that there are not those who believe in the demonic – there is plenty of dabbling with the occult. But the ordinary man in the street tends to think that this visible world is all that there is. The forces of evil that bear on him are grounded in this world. Christ teaches modern man the simple and immensely important point that the unseen Satan is out to get him. The Devil wants to devour him like a roaring lion, seeking its prey. At the Last Supper, he referred to Satan as the Prince of this world, and said that at that point he was "on his way." Here in our Gospel today, Christ refers to the demonic as a kingdom, and that Satan is the king of this black realm. He is the head of a dark household. Man is, then, up against a kingdom and if he is not part of the Kingdom of God, his prospects cannot be very promising. Further, Christ warns that though he may expel a demon from where he has been, one must be vigilant because the demon can return, and with colleagues. That is to say, one can fall away into a terrible predicament, if Christ is gradually abandoned.

Let us ponder long and prayerfully on the broad and simple revelation granted to us by Christ. This revelation has been the basis of millions upon millions of human lives, and has inspired profound and soaring thought and writing. Its teaching, simple in its Gospel expression yet ineffable in its mysteries, brings before us the fundamental realities for which we have been created. Among them is the grand choice. There are two lords, and two kingdoms. There is the Lord of all lords, Jesus Christ, and the Kingdom of which he is king. There is also the Prince of this world, who heads a murderous, hate-filled and aggressive host. What is it to be, then? Ah! Jesus, my Lord and my God! Him forever!

A Second Reflection: (Luke 11:15-26)

Jesus the Stronger One The first thing we tend to think about God is that he is powerful. Indeed this is the first thing professed by the Creed about the one God, that he is not only powerful, but *all-powerful*. We believe in one God, the Father *almighty*. This is a source of immense consolation, and it surpasses the religious sense and belief

of many of the religions of man. Man turns to the divine in order to have access to a higher power. In his ministry, our Lord revealed his divine power in so many ways. He showed that there was nothing that he could not do for the one who asked him (except for those things that result simply from man's free choice – for God will not *make* us choose in a certain way). Our Lord is the strong one, strong over the forces of nature and strong over the invisible spiritual forces that are the enemies of man. In Luke 11: 15-26 our Lord casts out a devil and compares his strength with that of Satan. Jesus is "someone stronger than he is", who "attacks and defeats him", taking away "all the weapons he relied on", and sharing "out his spoil."

Let us then gather with Jesus and fight against Satan daily, relying on the strength and power of Christ's grace, never being discouraged. With Christ we can win the blessing of holiness, and bring that blessing to others.



Saturday of the Twenty-seventh Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Esther 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 3:22-29; Psalm 104; Luke 11:27-28

As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you. He replied, Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it. (Luke 11: 27-28)

A Humble God It is a fascinating exercise to compare the images of God that drive the various religions and philosophies of man. A great breakthrough occurred in Greek religious thought when, amid the plethora of mythic figures in Greek religion, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle forged their notions of God. Aristotle, beginning with Act and Potency as principles in all beings with the exception of the First Cause, arrived at describing this First Cause as *Pure Act*. Aristotle's theodicy had considerable influence on later Jewish philosophers, and was powerfully employed and taken to new heights by Aquinas. The noted modern philosopher, Alvin Carl Plantinga, regards Aquinas as having greater philosophical power than Aristotle. However, when all is said and done, what are we left with in, say, the Aristotelian image of God? Profoundly insightful as it is, the God of Aristotle's system is exalted, yet remote. As Newman once said, it appears as a principle rather than a living person with whom man can relate – and I would say that it is precisely this (sense of a person) that was left behind in the wholesome leap from Greek mythical and popular religion to Greek philosophy. The solution to the difficulty is attained in the integration

of Judaeo-Christian revelation with the best of the philosophy of Socrates, Plato and especially Aristotle. In one of his Anglican sermons John Henry Newman, having said that the religion of classical philosophy is focussed more on a principle rather than a person, has divine revelation bringing before man a living, speaking, identifiable Person (or rather, of course, three Persons in the one divine Being). But now – and this is the point – what is our image of the divine Persons thus revealed? A striking feature of the God of Revelation is that he is (what we might call) humble. We are speaking here of the One whom Aquinas identifies as *Actus Purus*, Pure Act, understood as the Act of Being. He transcends all else absolutely. He reveals himself to be humble, most humble, and asks that his creatures imitate him in his humility. Indeed, he says that if we do not, which is to say that if we exalt ourselves, we shall be humbled.

I say all this as an introduction to our Gospel passage today (Luke 11:27-28), which offers yet another instance of the *humility* of God the Son become man. There he stands! Gaze upon him, him who

is the pearl of our race! This Man before us, in all his human individuality and therefore limitation, is the Pure Being who sustains all that there is. In him dwells the fullness of the godhead bodily. All that God is, this Man is. He is the Word of the Father, his only-begotten Son, his Image, his Fullness, while being a distinct Person from the Father. His splendour is veiled – while being revealed – by his humanity, and yet something of it cannot but be seen by observers who see and hear him. Thus it is that *"as Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you"*. She was giving utterance to the admiration and love that filled her heart on seeing and hearing him. What a wonder this Man was! It is the worry of every good mother that her children turn out well, and above all, morally good. The good mother grieves if she sees her child deteriorating in his or her moral life, however successful her child may be materially and financially. How blessed then, the woman of our Gospel passage thought, was the mother of this Man before her! Her praise of Mary was in the first instance, praise of her Son. But now, notice how our Lord deflects the praise away, in

effect from himself, to a more universal principle which, of course, applied in the first instance to his mother. Do not think of the blessedness of having me for a son, he replies. Think rather of the blessedness of hearing the word of God and putting it into practice. Many things are revealed in this. The words of the woman in the crowd show forth Christ's own greatness. They praise the greatness of his mother, and Christ's reply identifies Mary's fundamental grandeur. They set forth the path to be followed by all. But – and this is the point of this reflection – they also show the humility of God in Christ, turning the focus of praise away from himself.

Our Lord invites us to come to him and to learn from him. "*Come to me, all you that labour and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls*" (Matthew 11:29). "*He who sees me, sees the Father,*" our Lord said to his disciples. So Christ reveals the heart of God. God has a heart that is meek and humble. The Father is humble, as is Christ. Their life in

communion is the Holy Spirit – so the Holy Spirit is humble. Humility reigns supreme in the heart of the triune God. Let us strive to be humble, then, in the likeness of Jesus Christ!

A Second Reflection: (Galatians 3:22-29; Luke 11:27-28)

Christ or Sin St Paul sets a stark picture of the entire visible reality. He says that "*Scripture makes no exceptions when it says that sin is master everywhere*" – all are under sin (Galatians 3: 22). This is the hidden force behind the world as we see it. It is not the only force, as he will point out, but it is the great factor we must take into account if we are to understand our world and our situation. There is a tyrant at work, and it is sin. It is a force that fights against the Lord and Master who is God. The greater power is Christ, and he is the answer to the world's condition. Through our baptism we are "in Christ" and are "clothed in Christ" and are "belonging to Christ" (Galatians 3: 28-29). Thus we are heirs to all that God has promised and are able to overcome the tyrant which is sin.

Let us make our choice every day for Christ our Master. There is this great choice to be made and to be lived out: either Christ, or sin and all that leads to sin. We chose Christ when we resolve to "hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28).



Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 5:14-17; Psalm 98:1-4;

2 Timothy 2:8-13; Luke 17:11-19

As Jesus continued his journey to Jerusalem, he travelled through Samaria and Galilee. As he was entering a village, ten lepers met him. They stood at a distance from him and raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!" And when he saw them, he said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." As they were going they were cleansed. And one of them, realizing he had been healed, returned,

glorifying God in a loud voice; and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. Jesus said in reply, "Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? Has none but this foreigner returned to give glory to God?" Then he said to him, "Stand up and go; your faith has saved you." (Luke 17:11-19)

Thanks and Praise

Our Lord strongly encourages us to *ask*. He says that if we do ask, we shall receive. Somewhere among his many works, St Alphonsus Liguori writes that the main reason why people do not receive from God much more than they actually get, is that they ask for so little. He goes on to say that if we do not bother to ask God for the things we really need – such as his spiritual gifts and graces – our salvation is at risk. So we should ask God for what we need, just as a child would and should ask his parent for what he needs. In fact, it pleases God when we ask him, with confidence and persistence, for what in his sight we think we need. As a wonderful Father, he loves to hear our prayers and answer them in the way he knows is truly best for us. Consider our passage today, in which our Lord cures the lepers

(Luke 17:11-19). The lepers stood a long way off asking our Lord to have pity on them. It was a prayer of petition to Jesus, heartfelt and full of faith, knowing he could answer their plea. Forthwith, Jesus granted their request and their healing soon followed. It is a typical example of the power of the prayer of petition in the Gospels. But then only one of the ten lepers, and he not of the Jewish faith but a Samaritan, returned praising God and falling at the feet of Jesus to thank him. *"This made Jesus say, 'Were not all ten made clean? The other nine, where are they? It seems that no one has come back to give praise to God, except this foreigner'..."* Our Lord expected a response of thanks and praise from each. This shows that the prayer of thanks for blessings received is pleasing to him, together with praise for all that he is – so good, so loving, so holy. Just as every event and need can be the occasion of humbly asking God for something, so every event and need can be the reason for thanking and praising him. The saints thanked him for their very sufferings, knowing that whatever he allows is for our good. St Paul tells us to *"Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."* We are to give thanks in all

circumstances. He says it again elsewhere, "*Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.*"

Now, all the masters of the spiritual life lay it down that humility is the foundation thereof. It is therefore imperative that we grow in the virtue of humility if we wish to be truly religious, let alone a sincere disciple of Jesus Christ. How are we to become humble, though? An important means is to take concrete steps to grow in the spirit of *gratitude*, trying – as St Paul enjoins – to be constantly *thankful* to God for *everything*. The greatest prayer of thanksgiving is the Mass, at which we join with our Lord in the thanks he offers to the Father on our behalf. The meaning of the word "Eucharist" is precisely "thanksgiving." As we think of the leper returning to our Lord and falling at his feet to thank him, let us resolve to fill up our life of prayer with thanksgiving to God. There is also the duty and the call to praise him. Praise is the form of prayer which recognises most immediately that God is God. It praises God for his own sake and gives him glory, quite beyond what he has done for us, but simply because he is what he

is. He is God, and for this we praise him and give him glory. When the leper returned to fall at the feet of our Lord and thank him, our Lord's complaint was that he was the only one to come back to *give glory to God*. Our Lord wanted to see his heavenly Father praised for what the lepers had received. So we ought not only thank God, but praise him. Of course, if we thank God a lot, we are disposing ourselves to praise him, and in praising God we are most united to those in heaven, for that is what they especially do. Heaven is filled with the praise of God, as it is with intercession on our behalf. Praise of God reaches its summit in adoration of him. How, then, can we grow in the ability to praise God? Our ability to praise God will grow in the measure that we are able to praise at all. Just as we could ask ourselves how often we thank others, we could also ask ourselves how often we praise them. If we learn to praise others and make it a habit, we shall grow in the ability to praise God. We ought strive to become people who are very reluctant to criticise others and prone to praise them. A person who praises a lot helps those being praised, and also develops his own capacity to praise God.

Let us often give glory and praise to God in our prayer, while also praising others, and being reluctant to criticise them. At Mass we praise God in union with our Lord. Let us resolve not only to ask God for all we need — and we must do this daily — but also resolve to fill our prayer and our entire life with thanks and praise. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit! As it was in the beginning, is now, and forever shall be!

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2637-2643:

(Thanks and Praise)

A Second Reflection: (Luke 17:11-19)

Gratitude It is very clear in today's Gospel passage that it pleases our Lord greatly if we are grateful for his gifts, and if we praise and glorify him as a result. "*Were not all ten made clean? The other nine, where are they? It seems that no one has come back to give praise to God except this foreigner.*" I remember reading the story of a soldier who, as a result of a battle he was in, had to have one of his legs

amputated. He was inconsolable, and was furious with everyone as a result, including God. But then shortly afterwards another soldier came in seated in a wheelchair, and he had lost both legs. But that soldier was happy, joyful to all, and grateful. He was grateful, for his life had been spared, when others had died. That was a tremendous lesson to the soldier who had lost one leg. It is often pointed out that we can look on a half-filled glass in two ways – it can be seen as half-empty, or half-full. The soldier who had lost both legs was grateful for the blessings that had been granted to him. He was alive, and enjoyed the friendship and care of others. In a parable elsewhere in the Gospel, the servant who had been forgiven ten thousand talents forgot what had been done for him and was merciless with a fellow-servant who owed him hundreds of denarii. Let us resolve to cultivate a profound recognition of what God has done in our life, like the Samaritan leper of the Gospel today. There are two ways of viewing a gift. Some, when they receive a gift, think primarily of what the gift will do for them. Others think of the love and goodness of the giver. The Samaritan leper, liberated from his leprosy, was filled with the thought

of the Giver of this blessing, and returned to thank and render honour to him. He did not just think of how he had benefited. But let us notice what our Lord says at the end. "*Your faith has saved you*" (Luke 17:11-19). It was the person's faith that led him to ask for the cure, and our Lord's words suggest that his faith led him to be grateful and pleasing to God. It doubtlessly led him to a deeper relationship with God and a greater faith in him. Our faith should lead us to ask for what we need, especially for our spiritual needs. It should lead us to be aware of all that God has given us and is continually giving us. It should lead us always to be *thankful*, and *humble*.

Furthermore — and this is important — our faith will lead us to be thankful to God also in bad times. That is a real and lively faith — to be able to thank and praise God in both the good times and the bad. That is the faith that distinguishes the profoundly religious and Christian person. It often happens that when bad times come — some serious mishap — we pray and pray, asking God to help us in the situation, or to rectify it. Then, much later, when we look back on that

situation and on what followed it, we can see that the hand of God was upon us. Indeed, we may come to see that in allowing that very distressing situation to come upon us, God was in fact preparing the way for something better. His goodness was at work in allowing the apparent evil. Our faith helps us to be grateful, even in the bad times. This is the age of polls and surveys. At every state or federal election we hear what the polls are saying. I wonder what a poll would show of the principal virtues of our day. I suspect that the virtue of gratitude would not rank highly. We are continually being presented with advertisements inducing us to get more and more, leading us to forget the many blessings we continually have. Are we characteristically grateful? I tend to think that typically we are angry. God knows our needs far more than we do. Our Lord tells us elsewhere in the Gospel, *"Do not worry, your heavenly Father knows your needs before you ask them. Seek first the kingdom of God and his justice and all these things will be given to you besides."* Our Lord is not promising that we will get all we want, but he is promising that he will look after us. And what is it that we truly need? In his *Spiritual*

Exercises St Ignatius Loyola has us pray for one thing: *God's love and his grace*. If we have an abundance of this, we have all we truly need. We can then leave most of the rest to God. So important is this element of thanksgiving that the Mass itself is called a prayer of thanks. It is the Eucharist, which is the Greek word for giving thanks. The Eucharistic Prayer, during which the bread and wine become the risen Jesus in his whole human and divine reality, is the prayer in which above all we give thanks to God for all he has done, especially in and through the sacrifice of his Son Jesus.

At Sunday Mass we ought, in union with our Lord, ask God for all that we need, praying for those in need whether alive or dead, and giving thanks and praise for what he has done for all of us. Especially in this greatest of prayers of thanks and praise, we ought ask for the grace to think much on all that God has done for us, asking him to help us to be deeply grateful.



Monday of the Twenty-eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 4: 22-24.26-27.31-5:1; Psalm 112;
 Luke 11:29-32

While still more people gathered in the crowd, Jesus said to them, "This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. At the judgment the queen of the south will rise with the men of this generation and she will condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear

the wisdom of Solomon, and there is something greater than Solomon here. At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here.” (Luke 11:29-32)

Faith One of the gains in the modern religious scene is the respect for the religious convictions of others (although there are serious anomalies to this if the religion goes radically counter to secular positions). It is perceived as important for general education that students be introduced to an understanding of religions very different from their own. On its part, the Catholic Church from its early centuries has seen positive features in the religious thought of other peoples. Several of the early Fathers of the Church taught that "seeds of the Word" had been implanted in the thought of the pagan peoples. The thinking of many of the Alexandrian Fathers greatly influenced the Anglican Newman in his teaching on a universal Revelation, that there is a form of inspiration or divine guidance given to great thinkers and

religious teachers beyond the pale of God's chosen people. As well as this, there has been a renewed appreciation of the right of freedom in religious belief, such that we all recognize that we must respect those who sincerely differ from us even in fundamentals of belief. However, for these and other reasons we can easily pass on to thinking that whatever a person thinks and believes in the realm of religion is legitimate *if sincerely held*, and indeed, morally commendable if sincerely held. All that counts for moral legitimacy is *sincerity*. If a person sincerely thinks that Christ is not God, that he was a mere man, that he did not rise from the dead, then these "opinions" have no greater significance in respect to one's moral state than any other mere opinion. It is all ultimately a matter of opinion, and the only decider of moral worth is sincerity, whatever be the opinion sincerely held. But now, let us notice what our Lord has to say of the people who did not accept him and his claims in faith. He called them an evil generation. They were not merely of a mistaken opinion about him. Indeed, our Lord does not merely condemn them for their refusal to believe him. He condemns them for demanding signs from him that

would prove his credentials to their satisfaction. They were an evil generation, asking for a sign.

Our Lord's severe strictures suggest that faith in him and recognition of his Person and prerogatives involve far more than a mere intellectual consideration of the issues. One needs to have a certain moral probity also – and our Lord is saying here that those to whom he was referring lacked just this. They were heading for condemnation because their lack of faith in him was culpable, and even certain pagans will condemn them – the queen of the South who recognized the wisdom of Solomon, and the people of Nineveh who accepted the preaching of Jonah. He is implying that it is even within the capacity of the pagan to recognize his greatness, let alone the chosen people of Israel with all their historical preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Our Lord does not here say that *every* person who lacks faith in him or who refuses faith in him will be condemned – he is speaking *here* of those who were demanding a sign as proof of his credentials. His denunciation is directed to a specific audience, just as

others of his denunciations had specific audiences in mind. For instance, he called the scribes and Pharisees frauds (hypocrites) and (because of this,) blind guides. But he was not accusing *all* the Pharisees of this. He had at least one disciple among them — Nicodemus (and probably others), who showed his colours at Christ's burial. Joseph of Arimathea was also a leader among the Jews. The point, though, is that our Lord's critique of the lack of faith of at least many shows that faith in Jesus Christ is a sign of moral goodness and a cause of it. Its lack can be a sign of a lack of moral goodness and, accordingly, can bring condemnation. Indeed, just before he ascended into heaven, our Lord told the Twelve to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all his commands. Then he warns that those who believe will be saved, and those who do not will be condemned. Of course, the Church teaches that this must be a truly culpable and knowing rejection of the faith, but it shows that faith is an act of the will, a personal choice, for which, like all other moral choices, one will be held to account. Lack of faith is not just a mere innocent viewpoint.

Faith in Jesus Christ is perhaps the highest of moral acts, having in it the seed of the most glorious results. On one occasion a young man asked our Lord what he must do to inherit eternal life. Keep the commandments, was our Lord's reply. I have kept them since my youth, the man replied. At this our Lord looked on him with love, and said: if you wish to be perfect, sell all and come, follow *me*. If you wish to be good, keep the commandments, but if you wish to seek perfection, believe and follow *me*. Faith in Jesus Christ is, then, the foundation of a life that is heading for perfection.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 11: 29-32)

Knowing Our Lord Our Lord condemned those who were demanding from him a sign to prove his credentials: "*This is an evil generation; it is asking for a sign. The only sign it will be given is the sign of Jonah*" (Luke 11: 29). As a matter of fact, he would point repeatedly to the "works" and miracles that he did, and after his resurrection his apostles would refer to his "mighty works". Nevertheless, it is clear from the passage just mentioned that

our Lord regarded himself as manifesting in his very Person, in his preaching and wisdom all that his hearers and viewers needed to be convinced, were their hearts rightly disposed. The Queen of the South *"came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and there is something greater than Solomon here."* Let us apply our Lord's strictures to ourselves. If our hearts are right, merely getting to know our Lord will lead to personal conviction about him.

We get to know our Lord by spending real time in prayer and meditating in faith on his very Person. We ought spend regular quality time daily with our Lord in the Gospel settings and scenes, learning more and more of his heart. *Come to me*, he said, *learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart*. It is by coming to him and learning of him that we will come to love him, believe in him, and follow him.



Tuesday of the Twenty-eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 5:1-6; Psalm 118; Luke 11:37-41

After Jesus had spoken, a Pharisee invited him to dine at his home. He entered and reclined at table to eat. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not observe the prescribed washing before the meal. The Lord said to him, "Oh you Pharisees! Although you cleanse the outside of the cup and the dish, inside you are filled with plunder and evil. You fools! Did not the maker of the outside also make the inside? But as to

what is within, give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you.” (Luke 11:37-41)

Almsgiving Let us imagine the scene, with Jesus having spoken at length to the people. Among the crowds was our Pharisee, perhaps with several of his class and friends. They were a set apart, regarding themselves as, and regarded by others as, the religious professionals and leaders of the people. Our Lord never criticized the existence of the *class* of Pharisee as such, and probably they contributed significantly to the fidelity of the nation to Revealed Religion. It surely cannot be doubted that they assisted greatly in cementing the Sabbath Day in the life of the nation and making it a distinguishing linchpin of Judaism. Moreover, reading between the lines, the Pharisees themselves would not have felt that Christ was hostile to them as such, for we see here – as we see elsewhere – that a Pharisee took the initiative of inviting Jesus to his house for a repast. It suggests that Christ's denunciations of Pharisaical abuses were not perceived as frequent nor were they indiscriminate. Nicodemus, a Pharisee choosing

to visit Jesus by night for fear of the disapproval of his peers, obviously felt welcomed by our Lord for their conversations. Let us imagine our Pharisee of today's passage coming forward to meet our Lord at the end of his discourse. The Pharisee would have been impressed, and felt drawn to the Man all held to be a prophet. Imagine their eyes meeting, Jesus plumbing instantly the soul of the Pharisee, the Pharisee gazing on the Man who, he did not realize, was his God and Creator – Yahweh himself. He invites Jesus to his home, and Jesus – loving him as a soul to be reclaimed and brought nearer to God his heavenly Father – assented with a smile. He had come to seek out what was lost, to recover the lost sheep of the House of Israel, to tend the sick, and he lets the Pharisee lead him to his home. All understood that Jesus sought the favour of no-one, but spoke the truth in sincerity – which on one occasion his enemies acknowledged to him before trying to trap him. So he went to the house, and with simplicity took his place reclining at table. But the Pharisee's eyes widened – this prophet had neglected to observe the elaborate ceremonial washing. It was a serious omission.

I do not imagine the rebuke which Jesus gave – showing that he immediately read the heart of his host – as a rebuke uttered sharply and with sting. I imagine Jesus looking steadily at his host whose expression involuntarily revealed surprise of mind. Let us imagine their eyes meeting, with the Pharisee conscious that Jesus knew exactly what he was thinking. Let us imagine Christ gazing at his host, and with a smile on his face, slowly shaking his head as he spoke. A benign tone characterizes our Lord's voice as he says to the Pharisee, full of calm assurance, that he was very, very foolish. Our Lord wished to reclaim this benighted Pharisee, so typical in his notions of many of his professional set. He spoke genially but frankly, and before the others – perhaps most of the guests were his own disciples. I doubt that our Lord spoke in such a way as to humiliate publicly his host, an honoured member of the community. The Pharisee had not actually said anything to Jesus – he had only had his thoughts. I suspect that in the case of this particular Pharisee, we have a person led astray in his notions but not hostile as such. To a greater or lesser extent, we are, so many of us, astray in our notions. Christ deals patiently with us, correcting us of

our serious faults, faults of which we may be scarcely conscious. Now, our Lord's words suggest that our Pharisee, and many other Pharisees, were actually in a serious spiritual condition. The Lord said to him, *"Oh you Pharisees! Although you cleanse the outside of the cup and the dish, inside you are filled with plunder and evil. You fools!"* The Pharisee was neglecting inner virtue, the state of his heart. Inside, he desired riches and cared little for others. His position involved fleecing others, living off them, and caring little to support the needy when he was quite able to. Inside, his heart was stamped with extortion and sin. He was blind to this, and therefore foolish, taking pride and comfort in purely external observances. Rather – and this is significant and interesting – he should concentrate on giving alms. *"But as to what is within, give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you"* (Luke 11:37-41). This is a teaching that is applicable to us all. Almsgiving is central in true religion, and is a powerful cleanser of sin.

Our Lord states in the beatitudes that, blessed are the pure and clean of heart, for they shall see God. Here in our passage today our

Lord tells the Pharisee, who was so surprised at his not performing the elaborate washing before the meal, that true cleanliness is within. He must rid his heart of extortion and sin. The true filth is there. Further, and this is most enlightening, almsgiving will cleanse the heart. Indeed, our Lord says, "*as to what is within, give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you.*" Let us place almsgiving and works of mercy high on our spiritual programme, then! It will powerfully help us to be clean of heart, and close to God.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 11:37-41)

Our Lord desires our friendship

Our Lord was constantly offering his friendship. For instance, it is interesting to notice the invitations that our Lord accepted in the course of his public ministry, invitations to visit and dine in people's homes. He accepted the invitation from Levi the publican whom he called to follow him, and at that dinner there were the publicans and the sinners. Observing this, the scribes and the Pharisees complained. He also accepted invitations from Pharisees, one of whom was Simon, another was the Pharisee of

whom Luke tells us in today's reading: "*Jesus had just finished speaking when a Pharisee invited him to dine at his house. He went in and sat down at the table.*" (Luke 11:37-38). Our Lord invited himself to dine with Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, and saved the soul of Zacchaeus in the process. We read of his dining in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, his friends. He was at the wedding feast of Cana. Of course, the most important meal he led was the Last Supper, which became the first Mass. Our Lord, we are told in the book of Revelation, stands at our door knocking. The one who opens to him will see him enter and sup with him. That is to say, our Lord wants to be our personal friend, and to abide with us constantly. I have not called you servants, he said to his disciples at the Last Supper, but friends. You have not chosen me, rather I have chosen you.

As we think of our Lord accepting the invitation of the Pharisee to dine at his house, let us think of our Lord desiring for us a life of friendship with him. The love of Jesus, and living in his friendship is, in God's plan, meant to be the essence of our life. Let us resolve to

make it so and to draw others into this friendship with Jesus. With this in mind, every day let us invite Jesus into the home of our hearts, knowing that he wishes to come and, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, abide with us.



Wednesday of the Twenty-eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 5:18-25; Psalm 1; Luke 11:42-46

Jesus said, Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practised the latter without leaving the former undone. Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the market places. Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it. One of the experts in the law answered

him, Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also. Jesus replied, And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them. (Luke 11:42-46)

A true plan of Life There is a dominant thread in the strictures that our Lord directs against the religious leaders in our passage today. "*Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practised the latter without leaving the former undone.*" The practice our Lord is commenting on here would seem to be one based on Leviticus 27: 30-32, which stipulated that "*all tithes of the land, levied on the produce of the earth or the fruit of the trees, belong to Yahweh...*" The Pharisees whom our Lord was addressing were punctilious in this observance, even perhaps to excess in their care for detail. But our Lord does not criticize the practice itself – after all, as said, it appears to have been an application of Leviticus 27. The practices of the Pharisees, mentioned here as

being part of their plan of religious life, were founded on their interpretation of Scripture. Broadly speaking, our Lord expected and in fact commended this in the Pharisees, for we notice that he says they "*should have practised these things.*" That is to say, our Lord not only did not call into question such religious regulations (if adhered to in sincerity and good faith), but he expected that they be respected. Our Lord's critique related not to such practices in themselves, but to the *spirit* in which they were fulfilled. It involved the neglect of what should have been the heart, soul and purpose of any such religious regime. Justice and the love of God were being left undone, and were being replaced by a self-centred and prideful religion. These practices ought directly to have served the flourishing in their lives of love for God and justice towards others. Instead, they were performed with ostentation, excess and with self-commendation. Their own actions were the object of their regard, and God and neighbour were on the margins.

Taking the point more broadly, and applying it to a wider setting, this particular observance of the Pharisees which our Lord actually commended can be taken as reminding us of the gamut of legitimate, recommended and authorized observances of religion. A concrete plan of spiritual life will involve a range of judicious and approved religious practices. Our Lord's passing remark ("*you should have practised the latter*") suggests, indeed, that he expects some definite regime of religious living in a person's life. There should be what we may call a concrete plan of life which will involve specific steps to sustain and nourish the spirit of religion. This applies to the religious life of all of us. An unstructured, unpatterned, unregulated daily religious life is unrealistic and doomed to failure. It is man's responsibility to practise his religion in the concrete. The practice of prayer will involve certain prayers, generally also at certain times. The practice of self-denial will involve concrete acts of self-denial, and if the spirit of self-denial is to grow, there will be included in one's plan of life regular acts of self-denial. The practice of charity will include concrete acts of charity, and if the spirit of charity is to grow over the

course of time, there will be a planned regime of acts of charity. Christ our Lord will commend such a plan of life, if it is subject to the discipline of the Church (as in, say, Lent) and prudent guidance. But its true and fundamental purpose must inform its constant practice. The specific things we do to live out our religious life must be performed with the purity of a heart that seeks union with God and the fulfilment of his will. In a word, we must have a plan of life that disciplines our life towards its true goal, and which makes practical our dreams and intentions of holiness. But we must beware of the trap into which these (though not all) Pharisees fell. Our plan of religious life must subserve the grand goal of a flourishing in our heart of the most perfect charity possible.

Our Lord was once asked which was the greatest commandment of the Law. The greatest and the first was, our Lord replied, that we *love* God with our whole being. The second was like it, that we *love* our neighbour as ourself. Our Lord would teach his disciples that *his love* for us was to be our model in loving our neighbour. Let us every

day place love, the love of Christ, at the forefront of all we do, and at the forefront of our whole religious life.

A Second Reflection: (Galatians 5:18-25)

Our Daily Choice One often hears during political elections that the voters have a stark choice. Despite the claim, often there is not a stark choice at all. But whatever of political choices, there is a very stark choice before the Christian, and St Paul speaks of it in Galatians 5: 18-25. The choice is between being led by the Spirit, or being led by self-indulgence. Many people do not see in the Christian life the stark choice that is involved. They think that you can have your cake and eat it: that you can have it both ways. St Ignatius Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, has a powerful Meditation on the Two Standards. There is the Standard of Christ and the Standard of Satan. Ignatius insists that one must make the choice between them. St Paul says that "*When self indulgence is at work the results are obvious..*" Whereas "*what the*

Spirit brings is very different.” And so, he concludes, “Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit.”

Let us then every day make the choice again, and again. We must resolve to be led by the Spirit of Christ, which in effect means being guided constantly by the dictates of our conscience as enlightened by and immersed in the Revelation of Jesus Christ, as taught by the Church. The Holy Spirit, dwelling in our conscience, will bring *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* In a word, such a choice will bring life in abundance.



Thursday of the Twenty-eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 1:1-10; Psalm 97; Luke 11:47-54

Jesus said to the experts in the law, Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.' Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been

shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all. Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering. When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say. (Luke 11: 47-54)

The Judgment Late in life John Henry Newman (beatified by Benedict XVI in September 2010) wrote in a letter to an acquaintance that the first principle of religion is the thought of a judgment as contained in the feeling of conscience. He meant two things here. Firstly, that in the feeling of guilt, so common and normal to man, there is an inkling of a judgment to come. Man is conscious of having done some wrong, and fears a future reckoning. Secondly, this thought of a judgment involves a dim perception of a Judge. It is a natural

ground of religion, founded in the ordinary experience of the conscience. But of course, this religious sense is vague when grounded only on the moral instinct, and it can be easily ignored or explained away. The modern secular mind will not allow that the conscience involves the dim perception of an objective Lawgiver and Judge. Instead, it might allow that the conscience can recognize objective moral obligation, or more commonly, that its perceptions are but subjective personal tastes or persuasions. That is, it is just that you happen to think that this or that is wrong (because of your upbringing, environment, or genes), but there is no properly objective truth to your moral view. All this is to say that if religion were to be based on natural moral instincts alone, its basis would be uncertain indeed. Man needs Revelation. Nature, in fact, is oriented to what Revelation presents. The conscience of man supports what God has revealed. It disposes man to accept what God reveals of himself. What vitiates this, however, is that man is profoundly wounded by sin, and so his conscience is similarly wounded. Hence man can be found to be inimical to what God reveals. His best nature is oriented to Revelation,

but sin can and does thwart this wholesome natural orientation to true religion. For instance, despite the intimations of the conscience that there is a judgment, God's revelation of this fact is generally necessary if we are to be convinced of it.

In our Gospel today (Luke 11: 47-54), our Lord confronts his determined opponents with the revelation of a judgment to come. The fact of a judgment should have been before them even on the ground of their natural conscience alone. They had the testimony of the Scriptures too. But our Lord expresses it in the plainest terms. God's judgment is coming upon them. Time and again in the history of religion, it is the coming judgment of God which turns people away from sin and towards repentance. Our Lord is calling up powerful weapons in the hope that the hearts of his enemies will be changed. He bluntly accuses them of sin, and of being in the tradition of those who sinned in the past. *"Jesus said to the experts in the law, Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they*

killed the prophets, and you build their tombs." Our Lord solemnly warns them that they will be brought to account. *"Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all."* But those to whom our Lord directed his solemn warnings took no heed. We have here a striking instance of the mystery of sin and of its power. When fully flourishing it is culpably blind and hateful towards God – and so we see the Pharisees (not all, though) and experts in the Law redoubling their efforts to oppose Jesus Christ. In this, they were unknowing agents of Satan. *"When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say."* What is it that might have saved them from their tragic course? What might have saved them was to have taken seriously the thought of a *future judgment*, intimated in the conscience and proclaimed in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Let us all take heed. Life is short, and eternity is very long. At the end of this very short life, there will be a solemn reckoning, and our eternity will be determined. Now is the time for change, for repentance, and for striving after goodness of life modelled on Jesus Christ and those who are closest to him. Nothing is more important than that we become good – holy in mind and heart. That is to say, we must put on the mind of Jesus Christ. This is the challenge and the task of every day. Let us not waste our time, but gain the one thing necessary.

A Second Reflection: (Ephesians 1: 1-10)

Each of us is loved A very common feeling among people is that they do not matter much. This may be due to the way they have been treated during life, or perhaps due to the poor results of their work, or whatever. Many try by various means to bolster in themselves a feeling of self-worth, while others never have much of it. But what has been revealed is that from all eternity each of us is the object of God's special choice. God has *"blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose us, chose us in Christ, to*

be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence"

(Ephesians 1:1-10).

So no matter who we are or what might be our work and its upshot, no matter what our circumstances, no matter who may or may not respect us, each of us has a divine vocation in Christ. Each of us is marvelously loved by God. We must allow this hidden invisible reality to fill our consciousness and shape every detail of our lives. It is the foundation of the quest for holiness. Holiness is God's ambition for us, so let us strive to make it our own.



Friday of the Twenty-eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 1:11-14; Psalm 32; Luke 12:1-7

Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. I tell

you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. (Luke 12:1-7)

Fear God, not Man There is an old piece of advice that one ought not write in a letter anything which one would not wish to see published. In the age of electronic mail, many think that electronic messages are not seen by others, but of course major prosecutions are effected by producing what transpired by electronic mail. Electronic mail between criminals is easily monitored. Another common saying is that there are no secrets. That is to say, once something is confided to another (we are not here speaking of the Seal of Confession, of course), one must be prepared for the possibility that it may come to public light. These common facts of life give us an intimation of what our

Lord refers to in today's Gospel. The setting is that of throngs pressing on our Lord, striving to hear him and benefit from his ministry. On the face of it, our Lord's ministry appeared to be extremely successful. Many seemed led by it to God. But in the midst of this abundance of apostolic work, our Lord warns his disciples of the sin that is lurking behind and in the midst of the throngs, sin that would lead to his being crushed. It was the hidden sin of many of the religious leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees. They projected the face of goodness and religious observance, but in their hearts they were scheming calumny against Christ and the destruction of his Person. They were hostile to the good effects of his ministry. The ones who were doing this were "hypocrites." Hypocrisy was the "yeast" that permeated their actions, and which poisoned those who fell under their influence. Never look to their example, our Lord tells his disciples. How they appear is not how they are, and how a person really is will inevitably come to light. Their secret words and schemes will be revealed by God on the great day of Judgment, and their true character will be manifest. *"Be on your guard against the yeast of the*

Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs."

Our Lord is led to make a further point. Do not fear the judgments or the threats of one's fellow man if they run counter to the will of God. *"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more."* This, of course, is a major warning that reaches to all corners of human living. I remember when I was beginning my preparation for the priesthood many years ago, the priest responsible for that early stage of preparation warned often against "human respect." By this expression he meant being unduly influenced by what others would think when it comes to doing what is true and right. How powerful is this factor in human life! We are inherently social, and this good characteristic can so easily lead us to succumb to bad influences. I remember when Pope Paul VI came to

Australia at the end of 1970 he addressed the journalists in French. He told them that they were world power number one. How true this is, and how sad it is that the press fails so repeatedly and dismally to portray the truth. I believe that one reason for this common failure of the press to serve the truth is that too many journalists follow the pack of their fellow journalists and think and write as they are expected to. They lack the courage to question and oppose the trend and the assumptions that drive the trend. Or again, let us take what is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Christian religion. I refer to the evangelization of culture and society. Our Western culture is secular. Publicly, at least, God is made to be absent. A proposal is made that in a nature reserve, a picture of St Francis of Assisi be set in place, for he is a patron saint of ecology. But no – it is rejected because it is a religious symbol. How is society's culture to become religious again? It will only happen if people bear public witness to their faith. For instance, how many have the courage to make the sign of the Cross and say silent grace before meals in a restaurant, or when passing a Catholic church? Too many fear *what others will think*, and because

evil flourishes when good people do nothing, the evil of God being absent from society flourishes. We must fear God and not man.

Our Lord tells his disciples to fear offending God above all. In their secret conversations, the Pharisees to whom our Lord had referred failed to do this. It would all come to light. So then, *"I will show you whom you should fear,"* our Lord continues. *"Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."*

A Second Reflection: (Luke 12:1-7)

On the Fear of God It has been said that a very good indicator of popular culture and its values lies in the characters of popular fiction, and how these characters are portrayed. One thinks, say, of James Bond and various other figures of contemporary fiction. One of the characteristics of such figures is that they show little fear. Of course,

they have no fear at all of God because God is to them a non-entity. Our Lord speaks of a different kind of fearlessness. He tells his disciples, *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. I will tell you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has the power to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him"* (Luke 12: 1-7). Whom then must we fear? We must fear God, fear displeasing him. The context of our Lord's remarks here is his criticism of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. They lived for the approval of men, and they feared the loss of this approval.

We, the friends of Christ, are to live in the presence and the sight of God, who has counted every hair on our heads. Let us ask our Lady and our guardian angel to help us grow in a filial fear of offending God our heavenly Father, leading us to do nothing that will separate us from him — now or hereafter.



Saturday of the Twenty-eighth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 1:15-23; Psalm 8; Luke 12:8-12

Jesus said, I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what

you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say. (Luke 12: 8-12)

Bearing Witness In our reading of the Scriptures, including our Lord's words in the Gospels, we must beware of pinning our whole interpretation of the Gospel message on one or other passage. Luther chose to fasten on certain statements of St Paul in respect to *salvation through faith*, but neglected other statements of his about *works*, and certainly neglected St James's teaching on the importance of works for salvation. The whole of Christ's teaching must be considered when reading a particular passage from Scripture. In the twenty-fifth chapter of St Matthew's Gospel, our Lord paints a striking picture of the General Judgment. In that presentation he drives home the eternal consequences of neglecting to help our neighbour in need. Whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me. Now, many reading this go on to assert that all that matters in the Christian and human life is how we treat our brother in need. As long as one is truly benevolent, nothing else is of final consequence. But our Lord

does *not* say in that account of the Last Judgment that our treatment of our brother in need is *all* that will be considered by our Judge. Rather, this is the point to which our Lord chooses to give exclusive emphasis in that particular teaching. In that passage we are reminded that neglect and injury of our brother will be regarded most seriously at our judgment. Christ-like concern for neighbour is at the heart of the Christian religion. But our Lord makes it clear in other contexts that God's Judgment on us will consider other critically important matters. Indeed, immediately prior to the passage describing the General Judgment (Matthew 25: 31-46), the judgment of God is described in a different way. In fact, this prior description is given just as much space (Matthew 25: 14-30). The unprofitable servant who is cast out into the darkness where there shall be weeping and grinding of teeth is condemned because of his *failure to put his talents to work* for his Master's benefit. It was because he did nothing for his Master with the talent he had been given that he was condemned. So here are two adjoining descriptions of the Judgment that stress different aspects.

Our Gospel passage today (Luke 12: 8-12) is a further case in point, this time from the Gospel of St Luke. In Matthew's account of the General Judgment, Christ judges all the nations in the presence of the angels - *"when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, and there will be assembled before him all the nations"* (Matthew 25:31-32). It is to be conducted in the presence of all the angels. In our passage today from Luke, again, the angels will witness the judgment. Our Lord seems here to be speaking of the judgment on each individual rather than the General Judgment at the end. But the angels witness to it, both to those who pass the terrible test, and to those who fail it. But this time, what is the pivotal thing in the judgment of God? It is *whether or not we have borne witness to Jesus Christ*, with *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit* included as a uniquely serious issue. *"Jesus said, I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be*

forgiven.” Let us think of the martyrs. St John Fisher and St Thomas More went to their deaths refusing to allow Henry VIII the right to disown his rightful spouse, nor the right to rule Christ's Church as its visible head. They acknowledged Jesus Christ and his Church before men. The point I am making here, though, is that Christ's teaching on the Judgment of God is many-faceted, and ultimately stands on how we respond to him. Even the Judgment as presented in Matthew 25: 31-46 involves our attitude to Jesus Christ, for as our Judge he will say that "whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me.” In our Gospel today, our Lord stresses the critical importance of bearing witness to him by word. *"When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say."*

Life is short, and eternity is long. Let us make the most of every day, serving Jesus Christ in our brothers, making the very best of our talents to advance the interests of Jesus Christ our Master, and bearing

witness to him as Lord before others, prudently and yet with courage, whatever be the cost. We cannot avoid our Judgment. So, relying on the grace and the overflowing mercy of God, let us each day make Jesus Christ our life and our goal, endeavouring to see him reign as Lord.

A Second Reflection: (Ephesians 1:15-23)

Our need for Light If there is one thing we all need, it is light. Imagine walking along in the dark, when there is no light of any kind! One is helpless. One can live out one's daily life according to one's lights, but those lights can be all darkness. We have only to think of how so many human beliefs and convictions are absolutely contrary to what God has revealed, to appreciate this. So we need light, most especially light from God. This is exactly what St Paul prays for in Ephesians 1:15-23. He prays that God will give his readers "*a spirit of wisdom and perception of what is revealed, to bring you to full knowledge of him. May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see what hope his call holds for you.*"

Let us pray constantly for that light and for fervour so that we can attain our vocation which is holiness in Christ. Let us humbly open ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit, asking Mary to be our teacher, with our guardian angel our friend and guide.



Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 17:8-13; Psalm 121:1-8;

2 Timothy 3:14-4:2; Luke 18:1-8

Jesus told his disciples a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary. He said, "There was a judge in a certain town who neither feared God nor respected any human being. And a widow in that town used to come to him and say, 'Render a just decision for me against my adversary.' For a long time the judge was unwilling, but eventually he thought, 'While it is true that I neither

fear God nor respect any human being, because this widow keeps bothering me I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and strike me." The Lord said, "Pay attention to what the dishonest judge says. Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them? I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:1-8)

Prayer of Petition As we think of the history of mankind and of the religions of man, we quickly realise how normal it is for man to pray. As anthropologists and archaeologists agree, typically (though not universally), cultures have been religious. Cultures have manifested their character in ritual, religious myth and prayer. Our Lord's dictum that we are to pray always, never losing heart, is in profound harmony with the nature of man, for man is normally found to tend to pray. We ought live on prayer. As St John Chrysostom, Father and Doctor of the early Church, says, "*It is possible to offer fervent prayer even while walking in public or strolling around, or seated in your shop, or while*

buying or selling, or even while cooking.” Even though in our modern secular world many do not pray, a glance at human history and culture suggests that it is normal, natural and easy to grow in the habit of prayer. In our Gospel today (Luke 18: 1-8), our Lord speaks of the prayer of petition. The widow kept coming to the unjust judge with her petition: *"I want justice done from you against my enemy!"* For a long time he refused, but at last he said to himself, *"Maybe I have neither fear of God nor respect for man, but since she keeps pestering me I must give this widow her just rights, or she will persist in coming and worry me to death."* And our Lord said, how much more will God answer the prayers of those who cry to him night and day, even if there is some apparent delay! When we ask God for what we truly need, we are expressing to him our awareness of our dependence on him. We are his creatures and are not the masters of our destiny. Our petition is a real turning to God. This pleases God, and he helps us to pray. St Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that the Holy Spirit *"helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words."* God comes to

our aid in helping us to pray for what we need. The obvious question arises: What do I *really* need? It is this for which I ought pray.

What then do I truly need? Our Lord's whole ministry was concerned with the proclamation of God's kingdom and its establishment here on earth. God's kingdom comes to us when Christ comes into our heart and makes his home there, governing every aspect of our lives. We enter the Kingdom of God when we enter into union with Jesus Christ its King. So *this* is our greatest need, and is therefore what we should especially be praying for. We pray for whatever is necessary to welcome Christ into our lives, and to cooperate with his coming. *Father, hallowed be your name! Your Kingdom come!* We ought pray for the grace to be dedicated to extending this kingdom to the hearts of others, by bringing them to the knowledge and love of Jesus. To know the love of God! We ought pray that we come to know God's great love for us, and that *we be granted forgiveness* for our failure to live according to this love. We ought therefore be like the Publican all our lives humbly saying to God, "*Lord, be merciful to me, a*

sinner.” Our Lord compared that penitential prayer of the Publican with the prayer of the Pharisee in the temple, and it was the prayer of the Publican that pleased God and made him right before him. We are sinners in his sight, sinners who have neglected and spurned his love. We ought, like the Publican, pray frequently for forgiveness for all our sins – and how numerous must they be! It is a prayer, this prayer for forgiveness, that should be inspired and dominated by the thought of how much God loves us, how merciful he is, and therefore how offensive our sins are. Let us, in the presence of our heavenly Father, pray this frequent petition: Lord, *forgive us our trespasses*! This will surely please God. But of course we have so many other needs, as do all our brothers and sisters under God. Let us pray for the needs of all others, including those who have died. Let us pray for them to our Lady and to our guardian angel, and to the guardian angels of the ones for whom we are praying. The world depends on our prayers, the world of the living, and the world of those now being purified for their sins in Purgatory.

As we think of our Gospel today, let us resolve to use as much of the time God has given us in life to pray for what we need. We moderns tend not to pray, but we must pray for all we need. We need to know the love of God for us. We need God's forgiveness. We need the coming and establishment of his kingdom in our hearts, in the Person of Jesus his Son. We need so many things. Let us also pray often for others and their needs. Let us, then, ask God for the grace to pray constantly, never losing heart.

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2629-2636 (Prayer of petition and intercession), 2742-2745 (Christian Prayer: Persevering in Love).



Monday of the Twenty-ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16): 6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 2:1-10; Psalm 99; Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. Jesus replied, Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you? Then he said to them, Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. And he told them this parable: The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he

said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God. (Luke 12:13-21)

Avarice Notice what happened to the very good young man who, having met our Lord, was loved by him in a special way (Mark 10: 17-22). This man approached our Lord with the best of questions: *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* He, a young man at the start of his life, had *already* understood the overriding importance of getting to heaven. This is real success, and it often takes the wisdom of many years to grasp this. But this individual, still young, had attained this insight already. It may be remembered that the Sadducees did not accept the resurrection from the dead – but not so with this young

man. Further, he was *very rich* (10: 22). One may have expected that, being *very rich*, he would have settled into a view of life that looked to material prosperity and abundance as the only *real* thing to possess. But not so with this young man – he had his riches and appreciated them, but still, he truly wanted to attain eternal life. Further, he declared honestly that he had kept God’s commandments from his youth (12: 20). He was an exceptionally good young man and lived in the fear of God. To crown it all, with this brief introductory dialogue with our Lord over, our Lord *looked on him and loved him*. This is a very singular statement. We are told in the Gospel of St John that Jesus *loved* Mary, Martha and Lazarus. John the Evangelist, brother of James, was the “disciple Jesus *loved*”. St Paul writes that *Christ loved me and gave himself up for me*. This rich young man was given a very special grace: the gift of a very personal love by Jesus. Of course, Jesus loved *all* but there was something special about the gift of his love for this young man because it is specifically recorded. He had the makings and the call to be a saint and a special follower of the Master. His feast day could have been

celebrated each year of the Liturgical Year till the end of time – who knows! Christ invited him to something very special. *Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and come, follow me* – if you wish to be perfect! It seems that Christ discerned in the young man's simple questions that he really yearned for moral and spiritual perfection, for he had asked, *what more must I do?* He was an exceptional young man and Christ bestowed on him his special love in an extraordinary call. One is even reminded of the call of St Francis of Assisi.

But what happened? It came to nothing, for this good young man with such great promise and a very concrete opportunity to fulfil his best yearnings *turned away* from it sad. Imagine the scene! In a sense, Jesus Christ had taken a risk. He had offered a golden opportunity to a *young man* (John the brother of James is thought to have been very young too – they may have been roughly the same age). Would he take it? A lot hung in the balance during but a few seconds, during but a moment. The decision was taken and it was tragic. Imagine the disappointment which filled the heart of the

incarnate Son of God who had just given his special love to this young man. He watched him silently go – the young man was sad and so was Christ, but for different reasons. The young man disappears from history. Let us presume he saved his soul but it was tragic in its unfulfilled promise. Why did this tragedy happen? It happened because the young man had great wealth – meaning that his heart had become so *attached* to it that he preferred it to the call of Jesus Christ. I suggest that this case may be regarded as iconic of the danger of possessing temporal things, let alone very many temporal things. This is not to say that we should not possess temporal things, nor that we need not possess many temporal things. It is to say, rather, that there is a *danger* in possessing them. We ought be alive to the danger because our hearts are meant for God and his holy will. If we allow ourselves to be inordinately attached to the things which have come way, then there is the danger that the calls of God (be they great or small) can go unheeded. We cannot slumber in these matters, thinking that all will be well. Doubtless that rich young man did not think that the riches he possessed constituted a danger because he kept God's commandments

and wanted to get to heaven. He had holy desires and yearnings. But the danger remained and was real – if God called him to a higher generosity entailing a leaving behind of things he loved, what would be the upshot? Was he sufficiently detached for this? No, he was not. He was caught entirely off guard and thus Satan thwarted God’s loving plan for him. The young man was not vigilant in regard to himself. This tells us is that we must take very seriously our Lord’s first Beatitude, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 5:3). Our will, our heart, our spirit must not be *cluttered* with what is not of God.

All this brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 12:13-21), in which our Lord warns against avarice of every kind. The good and satisfactory life does not consist in the abundance of temporal possessions. Our Lord is not condemning the possession of temporal things, nor, as such, the possession of many temporal things. He is warning against a heart that is set on these things, a heart that desires them in themselves and primarily. He is warning against finding one’s

security in them and one's joy in life. We are called to be rich – but rich in the possession of God. What Christ proposes as a remedy for *avarice* is the thought of the Last Things. *God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God.* Let us think out real strategies to keep our hearts open and given to God.



Tuesday of the Twenty-ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16): 6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 2:12-22; Psalm 84; Luke 12:35-38

Jesus said, Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready,

even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night. (Luke 12: 35-38)

Stand Ready! Our Lord repeatedly exhorts his disciples to persevere steadfastly to the end. Final perseverance is the ultimate victory. It is the final blessing, for what use is it to have made a good start and when difficulty comes to fall away and be lost? But is there a key to this perseverance? Our Lord time and again gives us an answer to this. We must be ever watchful, ever ready for the coming of the Master. We must stand alert, being ready now for his coming and ensuring that were he to come at this instant he would find us at our employment. In the fourth century AD the fortunes of the Church changed, for Constantine declared (in the Edict of Milan), persecution to be over and church properties to be returned. He himself began actively to patronize the previously persecuted religion. But there were terrible problems ahead in the century unfolding, for the Arian heresy was about to erupt. A most impressive figure of the time was Bishop Ossius of Cordoba. He had instructed Constantine in the Christian

faith, and in the thirteen years that followed, guided Constantine in matters relating to Christianity and the Church. He had suffered in the persecution under Maximinian, and had taken part in the Council of Elvira (AD 306). In the early stages of the Arian controversy (AD 324) he was sent to Alexandria to investigate, and it was largely as a result of his report that the Council of Nicea was summoned by the Emperor. Ossius presided, and he probably (together with two Roman priests) represented the Pope. It was probably he who introduced the critical expression of orthodox teaching on Christ (*homoousios* – one in being, consubstantial), and he guided the proceedings to the proclamation of the orthodox faith. His whole life involved a struggle for orthodoxy. He went on after Nicea to preside at the anti-Arian council of Sardica in 343, and was banished for his support of St Athanasius in 355. But then in 356, when he was in his hundredth year, Ossius was imprisoned by the reigning Emperor and sent to present-day Belgrade. There he was put under the whip, and he, the famed Bishop Ossius so highly regarded by St Athanasius, broke. At the end of a long life of orthodoxy, he signed an Arian statement (the Second Formulary

of Sirmium) – though he subsequently repudiated it. He failed at the end.

This may be taken as one instance of many, showing how the Christian must stand ever ready for service right to the end. He must not imagine that his loyalty to Christ is assured because of past fidelity. He must be *ever vigilant* and reliant on the help of God, right to the very end. We may think of the Last Supper when Christ warned his disciples that he, the Shepherd, was about to be struck, and the sheep would be scattered. Simon immediately assured Christ repeatedly that he would be loyal. No, the Lord replied, for before the cock crows you will have denied me three times. Simon should have taken note and stood on *strict guard*, guard against fear for personal safety. He should have prayed lest he be led into temptation. Every day there are countless unnoticed comings of Christ into our life in the form of duty. John Henry Newman famously (in the *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*) described the conscience of man as the "aboriginal vicar of Christ." He meant that its voice has a divine authority. As the Church

teaches (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1777), when he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking. Every day is filled with scarcely noticed duties, all of which are manifestations of the voice and will of God. Christ comes to us with his call and his grace in the duties of every day, duties in our family, in our work, in our neighbourhood, in our parish, everywhere we live and move. We must be *ready* for his coming. If we are faithful in these little things, we are disposing ourselves to be faithful in the great. History is replete with instances of Christian fidelity to the end, despite terrible sufferings at the end. What is the key to this fidelity? The key is to be faithful and watching here and now, alert and ready for the coming of Christ here and now in the ordinary day. "*Jesus said, Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes*" (Luke 12:35-38).

How do we prepare for the future? We prepare for the future by living well *now*. Let us be dressed ready for service now, keeping our lamps burning now, awaiting the slightest indication of the will of God now, detached from all that may prevent us from doing the divine will now. The critical thing is that we persevere at the *end*, and the way to prepare for this is to persevere *now*. Let us pray often for final perseverance, and for the grace to be faithful to Jesus Christ today.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 12:35-38)

Stand Ever Ready There are so many who spend their lives working for and thinking about only those things that will inevitably pass away. The fact is that at any moment life itself could suddenly pass away. Created reality hangs on a thread, held by God. However, the profound transience of life is not as gloomy a prospect as this because there is a far more wonderful Reality behind the one we see and of which we are a part. That wonderful Reality is Christ who is coming to meet us. What the transience and mortality of this world really means is that at a moment's notice Jesus our master could suddenly return from

where he has gone. Indeed, all through our lives he is coming to us time and again in his grace — every grace is a coming of Jesus with his Holy Spirit. We ought be constantly *ready to welcome* his coming. His most momentous coming will be at our death.

"See that you are dressed for action and have your lamps lit. Be like men waiting for their master to return from the wedding feast, ready to open the door as soon as he comes and knocks." (Luke 12: 35-36). If we are found ready and welcoming the Master, he will welcome us into the tents of eternity.



Wednesday of the Twenty-ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16): 6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: Ephesians 3:2-12; Psalm Isaiah 12; Luke 12:39-48

Jesus said, Understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. Peter asked, Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone? The Lord answered, Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It

will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers. That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. (Luke 12: 39-48)

Responsibility I remember years ago a person saying that he wished that he hadn't been born into a Catholic family, because non-Catholics had it easier. They did not have the obligations that Catholics

have. The person who said this did not appreciate that the Faith is a gift, and that a great gift necessarily endows responsibilities. However, his slightly ludicrous wish reminds us of a fundamental fact of life. It is that we are all inescapably and radically endowed with gifts that bring with them responsibilities. We did not choose to enter the world – for only one Person did this, and he was divine. We find ourselves in existence, as living, breathing human beings with the power and the requirement to choose our course. We cannot renounce this gift as if it were simply chosen by us. If we were forcibly to extricate ourselves from life and its responsibility (by, say, putting an end to our life), all would be tragic for us. We cannot avoid the possibilities, and more fundamentally, the responsibilities flowing from our given situation. Martin Heidegger made the expression “*Dasein*” famous – we are *being in time*. We exist in time, and this inevitably involves the responsibility for what we make of our own being. Years back I knew a priest who, before he died in Spain, said that he was grateful to God for the gift of life. He had used his life well and fully, and it had been the source of blessings for very many others. As each person finds himself

with his gifts of life, circumstances and vocation, he must take responsibility for the use he makes of these gifts. If he does not, his life will be a tragedy, as it will if he positively chooses the path of evil. He must take cognizance of the life and gifts with which he has been endowed, and resolve to pursue the path of good. He is placed in the stream of time, and when that time is cut short, the quality of his being will be his own unavoidable responsibility, the fruit of his own choices. In time, and due to his choices – for he cannot but choose – he will be either good or bad. So he must take himself in hand and use his freedom to become all that he should be. It is imperative that he become and do good. Let us remember the words uttered by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper, that it would have been better had his betrayer never been born (Mark 14: 21).

In our Gospel today, our Lord refers to the seriousness of our responsibilities. He begins by giving a brief illustration: the householder cares for his house, and if he knows the hour the burglar will come, he will prevent the break-in. So, too, we must constantly

stand ready at our responsibilities, for we do not know the hour of the Son of Man's arrival. Now, this illustration came at the end of a long passage of teaching (Luke 12: 22-40) that was directed to his disciples (12:22). He had earlier been speaking to a person in the crowd (Luke 12:13-21) warning against greed. He then turned to his disciples to speak of dependence on God, and constant readiness for the arrival of the Master. At this, Luke reports, Simon Peter interrupted. Is this point meant "for us or for all?" That is to say, was it meant for all his disciples, or even for all the world, or was it meant for his closest companions, the Apostles who would be masters of the household that just featured in the parable? At this, our Lord speaks directly of the *"faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household."* So it would seem that our Lord here is speaking directly to the Apostles, to those who would have a special responsibility for the *"menservants and the maids."* Our Lord says that their privilege is an awesome responsibility for which they will be held to account. This responsibility is unavoidable. They especially, more than the rest, must watch and act in such a way as to be ready for the master when he

returns. If they are faithful, they will be placed in charge of all the master's possessions. But if they are not, they will be cut off and sent to the place of the unbelievers. There are different levels of awareness and responsibility, but *all* the master's servants will be held to account. *"That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked"* (Luke 12:39-48).

There is no avoiding the Judgment of God. We must strive for holiness of life. Ultimately, and in the final analysis, we shall be either good or bad, and we each of us will be responsible for our end. Further, that end will be eternal. We shall be eternally good, or eternally bad. We shall be eternally happy beyond description, or eternally miserable beyond description. It will all depend on how I use my freedom and gifts *now*, this very day, tomorrow and the next day. I am

a being in time, and my time could suddenly be cut short. Then, as a human being, how shall I stand? Ah Lord! Now I begin!

A Second Reflection: (Luke 12:39-48)

The Last Things Consider our Lord's parables in Luke 12: 39-48. It is clear from their whole drift that life must be regarded as a stewardship: "*What sort of steward, then, is faithful and wise enough for the master to place him over his household to give them their allowance of food at the proper time?*" Each of us has been given certain responsibilities in the household of God and at the end of the day we shall be judged on our stewardship. For all of us a judgment is looming on how well we have done the work assigned to us. Cardinal Newman once wrote that the first principle of religion is the thought of a judgment. Life is a test, a trial, and there is no avoiding the final hour of reckoning. It ought be the backdrop of all we do, with the realization that this hour of reckoning can come at any moment, for the simple reason that all created visible reality is profoundly transient. It hangs on a thread, the thread of God's creative action.

Therefore, *"You too must stand ready, because the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."* A great deal has been given us on trust, so *"a great deal will be demanded"*. Let us then always remember the last things: death and judgment, and then it will be either heaven or hell, and forever.



Thursday of the Twenty-ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16): 6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: Ephesians 3:14-21; Psalm 32; Luke 12:49-53

Jesus said, I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother

in law against daughter in law and daughter in law against mother in law. (Luke 12: 49-53)

Christ and Contestation One distinctive feature of the Gospel of St Luke is his narrative of the infancy of Jesus Christ. The account of Christ's infancy by Matthew occupies some 48 verses (chapters 1 and 2). That provided by St Luke is not far short of three times this length. The infancy is obviously of great importance for St Luke, and provides a notable introduction to Christ's Person and mission. There is the grand announcement by the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, revealing who her Child will be. Interestingly, while the Angel speaks to her of the Child's unique prerogatives, there is little on *how* he will prosecute his mission as Messiah. Again, when the Child is born, an Angel appears to the shepherds and announces that a Saviour has come – he is the Messiah, the Lord. Little is given on *how* he will save his people. The question, then, stood – how was the Messiah to save his people? We read that "*Mary retained all these things, pondering on them in her heart*" (2:19). An important revelation on this was granted

in the annunciation by the holy Simeon, led as he was by the Spirit of God. This Saviour who would be a light for the Gentiles and the glory of his people will be a sign that is spoken against (*seemeion antilegomenon*). Many will rise and many will fall because of him (2:34-35). His person and his word would, then, be the centre of storms of controversy, of agreement and opposition. He will occasion profound division and will suffer rejection, and his Mother, the first and greatest believer in him, will be thrust through by a sword in her very spirit. That is to say, he will save his people through, and in, *suffering and rejection*. This is the solemn note on which the story of Jesus Christ began, and in our Gospel today, likewise from the pen of Luke, our Lord confirms it. His mission, he says, is to bring fire to the earth – John the Baptist had stated that the One coming would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3: 16). But for this to happen, our Lord has a baptism to undergo, and how he yearns for its completion! But it will not be a peaceful path, for it will involve contradiction, strife and division. The proclamation of the Truth will not be accepted.

Christ went freely to his death bearing witness to the truth of his Person and mission. He told Pontius Pilate that it was for this that he was born, to bear witness to the truth – and in this he was the archetypal sign of contradiction. Many rose and many fell in response to his word, and his Person and his word brought division. Risen from the dead, and about to ascend to his heavenly Father, he commanded his disciples to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations. Immediately, his Church became a *sign of contradiction* both in Jerusalem and beyond. Within several decades, the Empire began to notice the followers of Jesus Christ, and it became concerned. The Christians stood for one objective Truth about God, and this, it was sensed, opposed the foundations of the Empire. All were to become disciples of Jesus Christ the Lord. It was a message that could not be tolerated, and so the Empire came down on the fledgling, determined Church, just as Jerusalem and official Judaism had. It was Christ's prediction on a much broader scale. *"Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two*

against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother in law against daughter in law and daughter in law against mother in law" (Luke 12: 49-53). So it has been ever since – a stand for the truth of Jesus Christ and his Church evokes opposition and even hatred. The Church insists that in her proclamation of the message of Jesus Christ, the method be one of respectful dialogue. We must bear witness to revealed truth respectfully and with a spirit of listening to the other, learning from any truth which the other possesses. But division and contestation is unavoidable, and we have this on the word of Jesus Christ. Bearing witness to Jesus Christ will not be easy. The Christian must gird himself for barbs and thrusts.

The principal source of opposition and, indeed, hatred of the Christian message now is, I believe, secularism – that secularism which denies to God authority and position in everyday life and society. But the Christian must be confident in the power of Jesus Christ, the "stronger man," who comes and overcomes the one guarding his palace

(Luke 11: 21-22). I like to see this exemplified in the arrival of Pope Benedict XVI in the United Kingdom in September 2010 for, among other things, the beatification of Cardinal Newman. His coming had been preceded by months of vituperation and opposition to him in England. His arrival silenced the cackle, and the grace of Christ accompanying his Vicar won over the realm.

A Second Reflection: (Ephesians 3:14-21)

St Paul's prayer for the Ephesians There are numerous prayers to God in Holy Scripture, inspired prayers. The greatest of them is the Lord's Prayer, the prayer our Lord taught us to pray. There also are the Psalms and many other wonderful prayers that embody God's plan for us. Yet another wonderful prayer is that penned by Saint Paul in his letter to the Ephesians in 3: 14-21. It is a beautiful prayer that describes the fulfilment of God's plan in each one of us. Let us meditate on that prayer and make it our own, praying for ourselves and for others. Addressing his readers, St Paul prays that "*Out of his infinite glory may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self*

to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith". St Paul says elsewhere that this is the mystery, the mystery of God's plan hidden till now, namely, Christ in us, our hope of glory. He prays that we will be "planted in love and built on love", "until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God."

Let us pray persistently for this grace, this divine power St Paul refers to, and for the wisdom and the will to cooperate with it in the great work of our sanctification — being filled with the fullness of God.



Friday of the Twenty-ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16): 6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: Ephesians 4:1-6; Psalm 23; Luke 12:54-59

Jesus said to the crowd: When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? As you are going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled

to him on the way, or he may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. (Luke 12: 54-59)

Wisdom I remember attending a conference of philosophers, and a leading philosopher of Australia – an atheist – was in debate with a leading philosopher from Scotland, a practising Catholic. The Scottish philosopher proposed that philosophy ought above all involve the search for and love of *wisdom*. The Australian philosopher disputed this. He said that his own wife was a very wise person indeed, but hardly a philosopher. But of course the Scottish philosopher was not saying that all wise persons are professional philosophers. He would probably have also said that in any case philosophy ought not be equated with the academic discipline of philosophy. A person can philosophize informally, but he may quite dislike the professional discipline of philosophy and even despise its preoccupations and much of its method. The Scottish philosopher was saying that philosophers

ought seek to be profoundly wise, and that their discipline ought serve the all-important goal of wisdom. A person who is truly wise sees through to the heart of things, and also has the wisdom to order his life accordingly. An intelligent and highly educated person may not be very wise, whereas a person of but moderate intelligence and education may attain to wisdom. Let us imagine a lad finishing his schooling with very good grades. He knows what he wants in life – for his ambition has been imparted to him by his parents. He wants to be successful in his chosen career. He wants to make good money, marry well, make his way in life and in general be counted as successful. Because of his talents and his energy – already apparent in his schooldays – he attains his goal. He enters the leading university of his home city, takes economics, law and philosophy. Quickly he discovers in himself a liking for the discipline of philosophy – and he goes on to major in it, do his Honours year in the discipline, and then on to his Ph.D, specializing in the atheistic philosopher Nietzsche. He does well in life, but despite his education and talents, he never attains to the true heart of

things: Christ and holiness of life. He never attains true wisdom, a wisdom which will carry him to success in the Afterlife.

In our Gospel today (Luke 12:54-59) our Lord begins by observing that his audience are successful in reading the signs of weather changes. *"When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky."* This may be taken as symbolic of so many of "the children of this world" who are successful in life. Our Lord's audience can successfully read the weather, but why is it that they "do not know how to interpret this present time?" That is to say, they cannot seem to understand the urgency and the nature of our Lord's preaching and teaching. He is proclaiming the presence of the Kingdom, which calls for repentance. They do not see that they must repent. They must change their course and turn to God for the immense blessings he is offering them – in his Son, Jesus Christ. It is similar to the urgent

appeal of St Paul: This is the day! This is the hour! Be reconciled to God! But the call is left unheard and unheeded. So it was in our Lord's time, and so it is from generation to generation in all too many cases. Our Lord provides another simile to illustrate the urgency of turning away from what is not to the point, and being reconciled to God. *"Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? As you are going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled to him on the way, or he may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny"* (Luke 12: 54-59). The (parallel to the) "adversary" in the brief parable is perhaps God himself who is calling the person to account, and will do so at the judgment which is nigh. Be reconciled with your adversary, our Lord says. If you do not, at the judgment you will be thrown into prison. There will be no avoiding the full account there. Let us pray for and treasure the wisdom that comes with faith in Jesus Christ, and guide our whole lives according to that wisdom. Let us not be merely successful, while lacking true wisdom.

It is notable how often the allusion to God's judgment recurs in the parables and teaching of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. The thought of a judgment can exercise the mind wonderfully, and bring wisdom. It is a simple thought, but it can occasion a tremendous turning point, and a real start to religious living. Time and again in various religions this thought has brought with it conversion of life. Great saints kept its thought before them always. It is a thought that will surely bring wisdom to our course.

A Second Reflection: (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Christian Consistency Several years ago there was an article in *The Catholic Weekly* (Sydney) containing an interview with John Phillips who has just received a papal knighthood – that of the Order of St Gregory the Great. In the interview he made the point that there ought be no difference between personal ethics and ethics in business and the workplace. The Church has insisted repeatedly that the Christian ought live his faith consistently everywhere, including in politics and the workplace. That is to say, what the Faith states to be right and wrong

ought be brought into the secular sphere. Blessed John Henry Newman in one of his *Plain and Parochial Sermons* states that consistency is the true hallmark of holiness. St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians appeals to his readers that they "lead a life worthy of your vocation" (Ephesians 4: 1).

All members of the Church, all of Christ's faithful, have a true vocation. The whole of their lives should be a worthy living out of that vocation. This applies in the home. It applies in the workplace. It applies to one's participation in the life of the Church. Let us pray for consistency in the living out of our calling.



Saturday of the Twenty-ninth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16): 6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: Ephesians 4:7-16; Psalm 121; Luke 13:1-9

Now there were some present on that very occasion who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them- do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I

tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Then he told this parable: A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig round it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' (Luke 13:1-9)

Repentance The modern division of the Gospel into chapters can be misleading, in the sense that it can lead the reader to think that a new point or stage is being introduced with each new chapter. Our Gospel today consists of the first nine verses of chapter 13 in St Luke, but the context is that narrated in the several verses immediately preceding them in the prior chapter. Beginning at least in verse 22 of chapter 12, Christ is speaking to his disciples. In his words to them – including to the Apostles (verses 41-48) – he stresses the seriousness of God's judgment. Chapter 12 ends with verses that appeal for repentance:

discern the drift of these times! (vs. 56) Be reconciled with your "adversary" on the way to the judgment! (vs. 59) This is the context of today's Gospel from chapter 13. It opens (13:1) by stating that "on this same occasion" (*en autō tō kairō*) – meaning (presumably) when our Lord was speaking to them of judgment and repentance – some told him of the latest tragedy, Pilate's massacre of innocent worshippers in the Temple. It was news of a terrible nature, but what do we see our Lord doing? He carries on with his point, making the sad news just communicated a reason for reinforcing his point about judgment and repentance. *"Now there were some present on that very occasion who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no!"* Perhaps our Lord could see that those who mentioned the news, and several of his disciples present, immediately assumed that this great tragedy hit the worshippers because of their own serious sins. But no, our Lord insists, that is wrong. But – and this is his special point which carries on from what he had been saying in

chapter 12 – *"unless you repent, you too will all perish."* Our Lord himself mentions another tragic event: *"Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them- do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."*

As already said, Christ's words in almost all of chapter 12 seem to be addressed to his "disciples" (12:1, and 12:22), with a possible exception – one of the "crowd" (*tis ek tou ochlou*) who features in verses 13 - 21. As already stated, this context of Christ teaching his disciples appears to carry on to our Gospel passage today in chapter 13, after which the scene changes to Christ teaching in one of the synagogues. My point in mentioning this is that it is his *own disciples* that our Lord is here exhorting to repent, and to bear the judgment of God in mind. Our Lord would not appear to be speaking here to grave and hostile sinners, as were some of the leaders of the Jews, his implacable opponents. It is to his *own disciples* that he is insisting, *"unless you repent, you too will all perish."* At the very least, he is

including them in his solemn injunction. It reminds us that repentance is a radical requirement of the following of Jesus Christ. Moreover, Christ obviously means this call to repentance to be a standing call, always to be heeded, always applicable. There is never a time when in some sense we do not need to repent of sin which, of itself and if unchecked, will lead us to "perish." Any deliberate sin in our life is a serious matter, and not merely that sin which the Church calls "mortal" – the sin which deals immediate death to the soul. The disciple of Christ must beware constantly of sin, regarding it as the worst of tragedies. Our Lord was told of the tragedy of the loss of life in the Temple, perpetrated by cruel people. Many other tragedies could be mentioned, and our Lord himself went on to mention yet another. But, our Lord directly implies, there is a far worse tragedy, and that is the tragedy of deliberate sin. We must repent of our sins and change our course, for the wages of sin (as St Paul would write) are death. If you do not repent, you too will perish, our Lord teaches. Perhaps the heart of Christ was also deeply troubled by what he could see was happening in the life of one of his most privileged disciples, the Apostle Judas. He

was not repenting of his secret sins. The upshot in his case would be calamitous, and Judas would be the perennial example of the unrepentant disciple.

Whoever we are, no matter how long we may be in the service of Jesus Christ, we must recognise the sin in our life and repent of it. Indeed, the spirit of repentance is the key to holiness, especially repentance from venial or light sin. If we want to make true progress in the love of God, we must learn to repent of light sin, sin that is not mortal, but deliberate nevertheless. If we do not repent sincerely, daily and progressively, of our venial sins, we shall never attain true and advanced holiness of life. Let us ask for the grace of ongoing repentance, and make the practice of repentance central to our efforts to know and love Jesus Christ.

A Second Reflection: (Ephesians 4:7-16)

Each Has a Share of Grace Very many people think that they have little to offer in life, that their lives are not adding up to much, and so

there is in them bitterness and disappointment. But notice what St Paul says in Ephesians 4:7. *"Each of us has been given his own share of grace, given as Christ allotted it."* Each of us is the object of Christ's choice and of his gifts. Each of us then has a real role to play in the lives of others and of the Church, for each of us has a grace. We all have something very real to offer. This should give us a sense of worth and of mission. We may have only the one talent, but whatever we have we ought put it to use in our life of love and of work. Furthermore, apart from this consideration, affecting our attitude to ourselves, we must never forget that each and every other person also has been given his own share of grace. Each person we meet or are involved with, has a role to play in the journey of others through life, something special to offer the life of the Church and God's family. We ought help all to recognise and use for God's purposes the grace they have been given.

Wherever God has placed us in the course of his providence, whether it appears full of promise or bleak to all appearances, God has

equipped us with a share of his grace to play our part in building up the body of Christ and the future of the world.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104):3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Sirach 35:12 14, 16 18; Psalm 34:2 3, 17 19, 23;
2 Timothy 4:6 8, 16 18; Luke 18:9 14

Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. "Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax

collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity - greedy, dishonest, adulterous - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.' But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.' (Luke 18:9-14)

Lord Have Mercy! In the course of the history of religions, generally the main attribute of God which man thinks of is his *power*. It is to that divine power that man appeals in his religious life. He needs the aid of heavenly power, and he knows he must not alienate the powers above. Now, God has revealed that his power is manifested in mercy. His almighty power has a certain kind of character, a face, as it were. Its face is not menacing, hostile, irritable, or indifferent — which is what one might think, were one to go on the

menacing course of much of nature, or on the myths and rituals of man's religions as they have appeared in history. Rather, God has revealed that his power is merciful. He is rich in mercy. But at the same time, God is a God of truth and holiness. He cannot accept one who presents himself before him as unrepentant of his sins, or as if he is without sin and therefore as having no need of His mercy. One of the great religious thinkers of the modern age was Cardinal Newman. He wrote that for man as he is, the sense of sin is the *starting-point* of authentic religion. Without that sense of one's sinfulness one's religion is hollow. The popes have taught over the last century that one of the distinguishing features of the modern age, indeed one of the greatest of modern sins, is the culpable loss of the sense of sin. We tend to think that we are not sinners at all. We tend even to have difficulty thinking what our sins are. We tend to think that we do not need pardon. This is because for modern man God tends not to be a reality. The Catholic who is infected with this way of thinking does not make many acts of contrition. He does not approach the Sacrament of Penance very much. He has difficulty even thinking of his sins. And of course, we

all tend secretly to compare ourselves very favourably with others. We are, in fact, a little like the Pharisee of today's Gospel. We tend to be unlike the Publican in our prayer, in the sense that it is not often that our prayer is like his.

In today's Gospel, our Lord tells his disciples the story of a despised tax collector praying in the Temple (Luke 18:9-14). He prays some distance behind the Pharisee, and he prays genuinely, acknowledging his true condition before God and asking God for mercy. The reality was that both he and the Pharisee were sinners, but the Pharisee was blind to his own sins. In his view of himself, the Pharisee was virtuous. He was not grasping, unjust, adulterous like the rest of mankind, so he "*prayed to himself*" (Greek: *pros eauton proseucheto*; Vulgate Latin: *apud se orabat*). Other men were sinful, unlike himself. In particular, he thought he was much more virtuous than the Publican he saw some distance behind him in the Temple, and indeed the implication in our Lord's story is that the Publican had not been living a virtuous life. But the Pharisee considered himself good

because all he thought of were the good things, as he saw them, that he did. He forgot the bad things he did, especially his bad attitudes of pride and vanity that informed the good things. Moreover, there was no acknowledgment of his dependence on God for whatever good things he may have done. The result was that he virtually forgot God. All he thought of was himself in his favourable comparison of himself with others. By contrast, the Publican looked to God, and looked to him for mercy. God was for him a God rich in mercy, which is the very teaching of Scripture and revelation. God loves all, but especially the one who recognises the truth of his own condition, which is one of sinfulness and complete dependence on Him for his mercy. It was the Publican who went home right with God, because of his prayer. Of course, he did not go home right with God because of his past good deeds. Rather, he went home right with God because he had obtained God's pardon for his sins. He had acknowledged his sins before God, before whom he had bowed down in all humility and reverence, asking him for his mercy and his pardon. The Pharisee had failed to do that, and his prayer left him alienated from God.

Our Lord implies that the publican's prayer for pardon lies at the heart of true religion, and is essential to get to heaven. Well, let us make that prayer our own, all through life to our dying moments. I remember seeing a wonderful movie in which one of the notable characters was shot to death by arrows. At his last moment he fell to the ground repeating the prayer from the start of Mass: *Kyrie eleison!* (Lord have mercy!). That prayer revealed his authentic religion at the last. Every time we pray this prayer at the beginning of Mass, let us ask our Lord to give us a true sense of our sinfulness, and a firm belief in his infinite mercy.

A Second Reflection: Luke 18:9-14

Prayer and Mission A very active Christian community (say, a parish) in which there is not much prayer going on would be a very poor Christian community or parish indeed, despite all the activity. As our Lord said, we ought aim to be praying always and never losing heart. This means each of us individually, and us – as a parish. It means having certain times each day for real prayer, and then during

the rest of the day when we work and engage in other activities, remaining in God's presence doing for him whatever we are doing. Today's Gospel tells us one fundamental thing we ought both individually and as a parish be praying for. It is the grace of forgiveness for our sins. In his story, our Lord tells us of two contrasting types. There is the Pharisee who prays to God, thinking of all the good things he has done. Then there is the Publican who thinks of his sins against his good God. Yet he trusts in God's mercy, and humbly asks for that pardon and mercy repeatedly: "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." We must learn to be sorry for our sins, for a lot of people have little sorrow for sin. People who are away from the practice of the Faith for years often have great difficulty thinking of anything wrong they have done. They have lost the sense of sin. At times, all they can think of are the good things they have done in life - and in that particular respect, despite their lack of religious practice, they are somewhat like the Pharisee in our Lord's story.

A second purpose of the parish is to help all to share in Christ's mission. When we think of the contrition of the Publican, and his appeal to God for pardon, one of the things we ought be contrite about is our failure to engage in the mission of Jesus Christ and his Church. In today's second reading (2 Timothy 4:6-8.16-18), St Paul writes that "*the Lord stood by me and gave me power so that through me the whole message might be proclaimed for all the pagans to hear.*" We are all called to be apostolic and missionary in our immediate environment at home, work, and in our parish. By our Baptism and our Confirmation we share in Christ's life and in his mission. So every day we ought ask ourselves, what have I done for Christ, what am I doing for him, and what will I do for him? This is a real reason for sorrow for past failures, lack of generosity, and for past sin. At our judgment Christ will say, I was hungry and you never fed me – with the spiritual food of his Person, his teaching and his grace. When did we see you hungry in this spiritual sense? we shall ask. Our Lord will reply, whenever you saw the least of these brothers of mine lacking the knowledge and love of me who is their life, you

failed to assist me! Apart from our own immediate sphere of influence, let us think of the work of the Church in the foreign missions. Have we prayed for the work of the missions? What contribution have I made for Christ in the work of the Church in the missions?

Above all, let us resolve to live a life of prayer, and to take to heart the example our Lord gives us of the publican who in his prayer humbly stood way behind, right out of the limelight, offering repeatedly to God his sorrow for sin. *O God be merciful to me a sinner.* Let us resolve to examine our consciences every night, making a sincere act of contrition. Let us go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation regularly. Let all parents help their children to be aware of their sins and sorry for them, seeking God's pardon in acts of contrition and in frequent confession, as should the parents themselves.



Monday of the Thirtieth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104): 3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 4:32-5:8; Psalm 1; Luke 13:10-17

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, Woman, you are set free from your infirmity. Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the

people, There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath. The Lord answered him, You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her? When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing. (Luke 13:10-17)

God of Loving Initiative There is a famous incident in the Scriptures when the prophet Elijah arranged a showdown on Mount Carmel with the religion and the prophets of Baal (2 Kings 18). The four hundred prophets of Baal gathered in the presence of Elijah and prepared their sacrifice. It was to be a competition. They were to call on their gods, and Elijah would call on the Lord. The god that consumed the sacrifice prepared for him would be counted as the God of the people. The devotees of Baal called and called. It reached noon, and still nothing

had happened to their sacrifice. Midday passed and the result was the same. Finally it was the turn of Elijah. He saturated his offering with *water*, uttered his calm and confident prayer, and the fire of the Lord descended and consumed his sacrifice. I like to think of the appeals of the prophets of Baal as indicative of the notion of the divine that – outside the context of Revelation – has usually been prevalent. The divine has seemed distant to man, distant and withdrawn. The divine has to be roused, besieged with prayers, lengthy and wordy declamations, and much noise. The divine seems to be content in its own realm once it has initiated the course of the world, and it leaves the world to lesser beings. In very many primal religions the high god departs from the scene once the world is launched. What I am saying is that in general, while often the divine is regarded as and called a "Father" (such as the "All-father" of the south-east Australian aborigines) he is not viewed as taking initiatives of *love*. He is not expected to be actively and concretely concerned for man's plight and welfare. He must be awakened, or else left in his remote abode, while lesser gods are supplicated. This religious assumption may be the effect

of the very course of the world on man's religious imagination. The world seems to many to be unfriendly and menacing. In the modern age of the secular mind, there seems to be little reason to set aside the assumption that a real and friendly god is a figment of the imagination. At bottom, Reality seems to be at best indifferent to man. Love is ultimately a luxury, an accident.

In our Gospel today, our Lord acts in a way that is fundamentally counter to this assumption. Unasked, he takes the initiative in answering the pain and plight of man. We read that on one Sabbath when our Lord was teaching in a Synagogue, *"a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all."* Let us imagine that woman as a sad symbol of the world, the work of God's hands. How deformed it had become since he had made it, when he gazed upon it and saw that it was good. There she stands, a daughter of Eve, bent and crippled "by a spirit" for many years. The world is sad and suffering, and is infested by many enemies. The garden has been attacked and

despoiled, and man suffers from generation to generation, with sin at the root of his troubles. What is to be expected of the Maker? As Pope Benedict XVI often said, the Maker of the world has a human face, and that face is Jesus Christ. He is the Revelation of the Father, the Image of the invisible God. As we see him think, speak and act, so we are granted a true knowledge of the unseen God. What does our Lord do? He sees the unfortunate woman and he acts. His initiative is one of love, power showing itself in mercy. *"When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, Woman, you are set free from your infirmity. Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God"* (Luke 13: 10-17). This particular action is not the only way Jesus Christ acted in the face of evil and suffering, but it is, I suggest, symbolic of the character of his actions. His entire life is one of active and concerned love, a love that takes the initiative in the face of evil. The true God is not withdrawn from the world and unconcerned for man's plight. In fact, he has revealed that man's deepest and worst plight is his sinful state, and it is this which takes him to his final destruction. But God has taken the

initiative, and in his Son Jesus Christ has taken upon himself the sickness and deformation that grips the world. He has expiated for man's sin at incalculable cost to himself, and for those who unite with him he has blown it out of the way.

The God of Elijah is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is his very own Son, united to him in the Holy Spirit. The triune God is a God of love, of loving and merciful initiative, of love that can be counted on for mercy and aid. We can depend on him for his care, most especially in our greatest challenge, which is our combat with the sin into which we have been all born. We must win this combat and emerge the victor. This we can do by relying on the love of our divine and ever-faithful Champion. Let us never fail in confidence in him!

A Second Reflection: (Ephesians 4:32-5:8)

Christian purity It scarcely needs mentioning that for very many years now it has been observed how sexually permissive our Western

culture is. Most people would have at least some sense of the evil and sinfulness of sexual promiscuity, but I am also sure that the consciences of many would be seriously dulled in this matter. Consider St Paul's harsh strictures in his letter to the Ephesians in chapter 4: 32-5: 8. *"For you can be quite certain that nobody who actually indulges in fornication or impurity or promiscuity — which is worshipping a false god — can inherit anything of the kingdom of God. Do not let anyone deceive you with empty arguments: it is for this loose living that God's anger comes down on those who rebel against him."* St Paul in these words makes it clear that we are speaking of mortal sin that will exclude the unrepentant person from Heaven. He also says that, *"Among you there must be not even a mention of fornication or impurity in any of its forms, or promiscuity: this would hardly become the saints!"* And he goes on to tell us what he means: *"There must be no coarseness, or salacious talk and jokes — all this is wrong for you: raise your voices in thanksgiving instead."* Obviously St Paul is speaking of such talk conducted in a way as to be occasions of sin, being clearly contrary to the Christ-like life the Christian is called to

live. *"You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord; be like children of the light."*

Let every Catholic Christian be a shining beacon of Christian purity in the modern world.



Tuesday of the Thirtieth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104):3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 5:21-33; Psalm 127; Luke 13:18-21

Jesus asked, What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches. Again he asked, What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough. (Luke 13:18-21)

To be a Saint! I have heard it said on various occasions that non-Catholics acknowledge that Catholics know how to *celebrate*. This has been especially said of canonizations – the proclamation and celebration of sanctity. Every saint is a marvel of goodness. It is the goodness possessed by Jesus Christ, imitated and gained (to a point) by the saint due to the power of grace with which he or she co-operated. This is the "kingdom of God" which our Lord so often proclaimed. It is "within you," as he said on one occasion. It consists in genuine union with Jesus Christ and the grace that forges and develops this union. It is the most difficult project in the world (because of the power of sin), but it has going for it the involvement of God himself. But it is a marvel, and it is the one thing necessary for all of us. Alfred Bessette was born in Mont Saint Grégoire, Quebec, (then Canada East), in 1845 – the year of John Henry Newman's conversion in England. While Newman was famous at the time of his conversion, and went on his course of a holy life (culminating in his beatification in 2010), Bessette was born and grew in obscurity. He was born into a working-class family, one of ten children (two of whom died in

infancy). His father died tragically when he was nine, and his mother three years later. The boy began a thirteen year journey of wandering from job to job with few belongings and little education. He was barely able to write his name or to read his prayer book. At various times he worked as a tinsmith, blacksmith, baker, shoemaker and wagon driver. What could be more ordinary than this? But therein lay a story of sanctity. From his earliest years, Alfred showed a deep spiritual life. He would often spend his scant free time praying before a crucifix or evangelizing his friends, and was already imposing on himself penances. In due course, his parish priest decided to present him to the religious Order known as the Congregation of the Holy Cross in Montreal, stating that he was sending to them a saint – such was the spiritual depth already attained by the young man.

It seems that Brother Andre (as Alfred was known in religious life) was scarcely literate. In a teaching Order, his job was doorkeeper at Notre Dame College in Quebec. There he stayed at that job for the next forty years while doing numerous odd jobs for the community. He

made his final profession at 28 years of age (so he was a late vocation) in 1874. He was a slightly younger contemporary of Mary MacKillop in Australia, who, though, was the saintly leader and co-founder of a teaching congregation. Their paths were utterly different and of course they never knew one another, though they were canonized together in Rome in 2010. Brother Andre had a remarkable influence over countless people as a mere doorkeeper, and numerous healings were reported as due to him during his lifetime. The essential thing about him was that he was a very holy man, gentle and winning. His confidence in the intercession of St Joseph was unfailing. He was three years younger than the Australian, Mary MacKillop, and died at 91 years of age, some 28 years after Mary MacKillop had died in distant Sydney. It was calculated that one million people filed past his coffin – this was a man who could scarcely read, and yet whose influence had far exceeded that of the most educated in his religious Order. What was all this about? His life was an instance of the power of grace, of the growth of the Kingdom of God in the heart of a generous man. God ruled in his soul, and through him God touched and led into his

Kingdom numerous others. It began at his baptism, and the growth became a mighty tree. As our Lord expresses it, "*What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.*" The birds of the air perched in the branches of Brother Andre's humble ministry as doorkeeper and odd-jobs man. Our Lord uses another simile to illustrate the transformation grace brings to a human life: "*What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough*" (Luke 13:18-21).

The greatest and most beautiful thing we can do in life is work for and attain goodness — that goodness which shares in the goodness of Jesus Christ. This the Christian calls holiness. The celebration of the canonization of St Mary MacKillop, Australian, and that of Brother Andre Bessette, Canadian, was a great reminder of this. The danger in a secular age, little disposed to acknowledge God, Christ and his

Church, is that such great people will be interpreted in secular terms – such as heroes of courage, concern, or whatever. But in the first instance, they are emphatically heroes of the quest for sanctity through the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. Christ was their life from start to finish, and this is the true challenge for every human being. To it, then!

A Second Reflection: (Luke 13: 18-21)

What the Kingdom of God is Like Our Lord described his mission in terms of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God, he preached, was near. In the prayer he taught, the Lord's Prayer, we are instructed to pray that the Father's Kingdom will come. This Kingdom is God's rule in and through the Person of Christ his Son. It is established through union with Christ. In our Gospel passage today (Luke 13: 18-21), our Lord describes what God's Kingdom is like in terms of two parables, two similes. It is like a mustard seed that grows to a tree sheltering the birds in its branches. It is also like the yeast that leavens the flour all through. So we are instructed to think of the marvellous

growth of God's rule, the growth of union with God so that God fills the soul and the whole of a person's life, and through that person the rest of society. This growth is primarily due to the action of God himself through his grace, but it is also dependent on our vigorous and constant effort.

The one thing we must unceasingly dedicate to during life is the coming of God in our hearts as king. Let us ask Our Lady for a deep appreciation of this and the wisdom and dedication to bring it to fruition.



Wednesday of the Thirtieth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104):3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 6:1-9; Psalm 144; Luke 13:22-30

Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” He said to them, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ “But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’

“Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ “But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’ “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.” (Luke 13:22-30)

The Narrow Door John Henry Newman, writing during the 1830s, stated that religion was criticized for being presented as gloomy and severe. He was saying that there was a common aversion to references to the judgment of God. God, people thought, ought be portrayed as benevolent and unthreatening. Now, of course it is an essential teaching of Scripture that God is rich in merciful love, that he is kind and compassionate, forgiving of those who repent. Consider the writings of the prophets. There is the marvellous teaching on God as

Husband of his people, ever ready to receive back his erring spouse. However, there is running through them all the dominant theme of a divine judgment, usually (in the Old Testament) a judgment worked out and manifested in temporal events. If the people do not repent of their present infidelity, the harvests will fail, the enemy will invade, the city will fall, the people will be taken in chains to another country. Christ is in the tradition of the prophets, revealing far more fully what the Scriptures had borne witness to seminally. The love of God as revealed by Christ is far more compelling than the prophets had shown. So too is the judgment of God. Christ spoke just as much of the judgment of God as did the prophets, and perhaps much more so. In his teaching though, the judgment of God was not primarily manifested in temporal events (though it certainly would thus show itself, as in the future destruction of Jerusalem), but in eternity. The final judgment of God, though not an absolutely exclusive teaching of Jesus Christ, was very distinctive of his teaching. Our Gospel today is an instance of this, oft repeated. To the question, "*Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?*" our Lord gives this warning. "*There will be weeping there, and*

gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last" (Luke 13:22-30).

The practical import of the Judgment is expressed by our Lord in a variety of ways. For instance, he repeatedly tells his audience to watch, ever to be ready. In our Gospel today, he warns them not to take the merely easy route, the path of ease and of least difficulty. The image he uses is that of the narrow door. Perhaps the picture here is of a large and spacious house, a palace of an important notable. There is a broad and public gateway into the precincts, and a smaller door more easily controlled and operated, through which special guests come for certain functions. Cities had their large gates through which concourses of people of all kinds with all their baggage could pass. There were also the much smaller gates that more carefully discriminated entries. Whatever of that, our Lord's point is clear. The "narrow door"

is the door of greater difficulty, the door through which not all will easily pass. Entry involves a struggle, a striving. The verb used for “strive” is that from which has come the English “agony” (*agōnizesthe*). The allied noun (*agōnia*) is the word Luke uses of Christ’s state in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ was (“striving”) in “agony,” and the door through which he was to pass was the narrow door of his Passion and Death. It was the path of the will of God, leaving him bereft of all but his obedience to the Father. That narrow door through which he passed involved leaving all behind. On one occasion a rich young man came in haste and enthusiasm to our Lord and asked what he must do to gain eternal life. He had kept God’s commandments from his earliest years. Jesus looked on him with love and extended to him a priceless invitation. *Go*, he said, *sell all you own and give to the poor — and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.* It was a much narrower door than that he was used to. But he was not prepared to strive to enter that door. So he went away sad. Every day, the duties of

our state in life and vocation will constitute difficult choices by us for God. We must be prepared to accept them.

Let us imagine the life of man. There is before him the broad entrance that allows for all types, all attitudes, all luggage. There is the narrow gate that admits only of certain persons, certain citizens, certain invitees. This is the gate, the doorway, of obedience to God's will and detachment from the luggage of life that distracts our heart from the one thing necessary. Let us strive to enter by *that* gate, the gate of union with Jesus Christ who passed through the gate of obedience to the will of his Father, inviting all those who love him to follow in his footsteps.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 13:22-30)

Entering by the Narrow Door *"Through towns and villages Jesus went teaching, making his way to Jerusalem. Someone said to him, 'Sir, will there be only a few saved?' He said to them, 'Try your best to enter by the narrow door, because, I tell you, many will try to enter and will not succeed.'..."* (Luke 13:22-23). The question put to our Lord about

the salvation of only a few was not answered by our Lord directly. But it reminds us of the overwhelming importance of salvation. The question I must ask myself is, what am I doing to be saved? Closely related to this is, what am I doing for the salvation of others, such as the members of my family, my friends, my colleagues? Ignatius of Loyola used to say to Francis Xavier: what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul? Nothing is more important than our eternal salvation. Whatever be the cost, we must take the necessary means, and our Lord's answer to the above question is, put a lot of effort into this. *"Try your best to enter by the narrow door."* Do all that it takes to follow God's will not matter what it takes, even at the cost of your very life. Do not presume on your salvation *"because, I tell you, many will try to enter and will not succeed."*

Let us endeavour to maintain a high standard of daily spiritual effort, the effort required to please God in everything, in all that we do — and by that witness draw others to enter by the narrow door too.

Thursday of the Thirtieth Week of Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Ephesians 6:10-20; Psalm 143; Luke 13:31-35

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you. He replied, Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will attain my end.' But for today and tomorrow and the next day I must keep going — for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the

prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! So be it! Your house will be left to you. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' (Luke 13:31-35)

Sin This Gospel passage has to be counted among the most beautiful passages of the Scriptures. Using such marvellous imagery, it speaks of Christ's love for his own. *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.* Christ longed and longed to bestow his blessings upon his chosen people, but they would not! They *were not willing* – and so the passage tells us about God's love *and* about sin and the obdurate sinner. Let us consider *sin* – so vividly represented by *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets*. There is something about serious sin and the refusal to repent which is a cause of great wonder. The Bible quickly introduces us to sin and – in the third chapter of Genesis

we have the Bible's first appearance of rebellion against God. It opens with the serpent, who begins his dialogue with the woman. He, the "serpent" who is "made" by God and is very intelligent, is the first confirmed sinner recorded for us in the inspired Scriptures. *"Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made"* (3:1). He is a *person* (suggested by the personal pronoun used of him), and is in dialogue with the woman. He shows himself to be an Accuser from the start, entrenched in antagonism towards God and in attributing evil to him. *"He said to the woman, did God say, 'you shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?"* God is a liar and jealous of his status. The serpent paints God as being evil. How we are reminded of the enemies of Christ, centred especially in Jerusalem! (*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem*) Well, let our gaze linger on *"that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world"* (Revelation 12: 9). St Paul calls the devil *"the god of this world"* (2 Cor. 4:4). We remember Satan's claim before Christ when showing him the kingdoms of the world. He said that all this was his and that he would give it to Christ if he worshipped him (Luke 4: 5-

7). Just as Satan dealt with man at the beginning, so he has in Christian history. For instance, take one event in the life of Marie-Therese Noblet (1889-1930) who was the first superior of the Papuan Religious Congregation, “The Handmaids of Our Lord” (founded by Archbishop de Boismenu). Her sufferings at the hands of the devils illustrate the evil of sin.

Marie-Therese Noblet was for many years of her life the direct object of demonic attacks, clearly because of the holiness of her life and the good she was doing in Papua. We read that Lucifer often set his more powerful fiends upon her. The author writes, “*One of them called himself Isokoran, another Sodic; others named themselves Jupiter, Venus, Juno... Lucifer was the master and the severest. He made it clear that he wanted Marie-Therese’s soul. ‘I will tire you out, I warn you, for I have worse things in store for you,’ he would cry. In the face of the unalterable courage of his victim he would burst forth in rage, ‘I hate you. I hate you ... how hard you are on me.’ He shouted his hatred of God, his horrible blasphemies ... Coming, as he usually did, in the*

evening, he sent his legions beforehand to prepare the way” (Child of Calvary, by Edmund Elliott, 1960, p. 119). There is a combination here of sinful hatred and childishness. Numerous other examples could be given from Christian history of the intervention of the Devil in his effort to lead God’s children astray. It manifests obdurate, determined and confirmed sin in the world of spirits. God is utterly rejected by his free creature. This is that “ancient serpent” together with the “third of the stars of heaven”, “cast down to the earth” (Revelation 12). Now, while Genesis 3 introduces us to the grand evil spirit, it also introduces us to the entry of sin into the world of men. The woman accepted the temptation of the serpent, took from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and ate – because it would “make one wise” (3:6). Then she “gave some to her husband, and he ate”. And so everything unravelled. The serpent was cursed by God, the woman was promised travail and oppression, and the man received his sentence of unending toil and death as his end. Then they were driven out of the garden and the “tree of life” was made inaccessible to them (Genesis 3). This was the result of their sin and we are reminded of it all by Christ’s lament

over Jerusalem. *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you.* But amid all of this dark sorrow, there is the wondrous promise of divine love. While God sentences the serpent in Genesis 3, he utters the great promise about the Woman and her offspring. He, the offspring of the Woman, will crush the head of the serpent.

It all reminds us of the love so manifest in Christ's sorrow while gazing on Jerusalem. *How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.* It is this, this manifestation of the love of Christ the incarnate Son of God, which makes our Gospel passage so beautiful and compelling. And so we are led to think of the two great poles of reality, God and Sin, good and evil, and the choice that is to be made by every free creature, whether human or spiritual. All the angels and saints have made this choice, and all men and women to this point have made it in one sense or another. All men who live now are making that choice, and all to come will make it. On this choice hangs the balance – and it is symbolized

by the sad choice made by those of Jerusalem whom our Lord was addressing. *You were not willing! So be it! Your house will be left to you.*



Friday of the Thirtieth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104):3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 1:1-11; Psalm 110; Luke 14:1-6

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? But they remained silent. So he took the man, healed him and sent him away. Then he asked them, If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the

Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out? To this they could find no answer. (Luke 14:1-6)

Faith and Reason There is an implication in our Lord's words to the Pharisees and experts in the Law which can easily escape us. The issue here on which Christ and his opponents locked was the observance of the Sabbath. Now, let us remember that the observance of the Sabbath was a point of divine revelation. It was the third of the Ten Commandments, the third of the three that governed the people's direct dealings with God. The Day of Rest was to be kept holy. It was to be observed as the Lord's Day. This meant Synagogue attendance and rest from the workaday week – and it was a defining feature of the life of the Jewish nation, as scholars of ancient mid-Eastern societies readily affirm. They all had their feasts and observances, but Israel had, in addition to its many feasts, the weekly Sabbath. Further, we must acknowledge the beneficial influence of the Pharisaic class in reinforcing the Sabbath in the life of the nation. Their traditional activity included the interpretation of unclear statements in the Biblical

scrolls, and the enactment of prescriptions that carried authority. They formulated specific laws that they deemed necessary for the needs of the time – such as the practical details of the Sabbath rest. Now, much of their legal system was built up on what "the sages" determined through reasoning and established practice, and there was a biblical foundation for their authority to innovate. In chapter 17 of the book of Deuteronomy, the inspired text (vs.9) directs that if there is a case too complicated to resolve, the people were to go to the Levitical priests or to the judge in office who will study the case and give his decision. According *"to this decision that they give you ... you shall act, being careful to do exactly as they direct."* Indeed, elsewhere our Lord affirmed their authority (Matthew 23:3). The point I am making here, though, is that their prescriptions involved not only Revealed Law, but a human application of it to perplexing cases. It involved the right or wrong use of reason.

Now, let us notice what our Lord says to them in today's exchange. Our Lord is in the house of a leading Pharisee – his being

invited shows that our Lord himself was not perceived by them as hostile to their class or members as such. The leading Pharisee and his class were watching him narrowly, to see if he obeyed the law of the Sabbath. This, of course, meant to them the Pharisaic regulations and traditions on the Sabbath. Those regulations were built up by *reason and custom*, and it is to reason and common sense that our Lord immediately appeals. Is it against the Law to cure on the Sabbath? our Lord asks. Our Lord places his simple question before a "leading Pharisee" and others of his group, and there they stood, with mutual support, and with their tradition behind them. But they remained silent – presumably because they, including the leading Pharisee, would not dare to enter into religious debate against Jesus of Nazareth. Christ dominated the scene of ideas and teaching. He repeatedly silenced his opponents, finally reducing them to implacable and secret scheming against his Person. Here, now, he appeals to ordinary reason: *"So he took the man, healed him and sent him away. Then he asked them, If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out? To this they could find no*

answer" (Luke 14: 1-6). With good reason you extricate your son or your ox from his situation of difficulty on a Sabbath – then surely you ought do the same with one enchained in illness. Such is only *reasonable*. It is but *good sense*, is it not? Among many things, this reminds us of the importance of the right use of human *reason* in living a life based on what God has revealed. What God has revealed has to be applied in everyday life. Christ himself applied it concretely to life, but of course left many details of life untouched. He entrusted his authority to teach to the Twelve, and in particular to Simon Peter. The Church applies the teaching of Christ to the extent it deems necessary, but we too must do this in our everyday life. Faith and right reason work in tandem in a properly religious and Christian life.

The Catholic Church has an extensive teaching on the relationship between two great gifts of God, faith and reason. Each needs the other for each to function properly in the knowledge and fulfilment in life of the will of God. One of the elements in the tragedy of many Pharisees and experts in the Law was their profoundly

deficient use of reason, which itself was rooted in their sinful heart. Let us then preserve in our lives a properly Catholic esteem for the moral reason and its place in a life based on divine Revelation.

A Second Reflection: (Philippians 1:1-11)

The Lay Apostolic Spirit Notice what St Paul says about the Philippians in Ch.1:1-11, and what gives him joy in his prayer. It is the remembrance of how the Philippians helped to spread the Gospel: *"every time I pray for all of you, I pray with joy, remembering how you have helped to spread the Good News from the day you first heard it right up to the present."* St Paul is not writing to a body of clergy in this passage, but especially to the body of the lay faithful. The laity had helped spread the Gospel. Moreover, they had done this *"from the day you first heard it right up to the present."* So it was an essential part of the living of their Catholic faith that they spread it. They had shared in St Paul's "chains" and in his "work defending and establishing the

Gospel.” We ought ask ourselves if Paul would say the same thing were he writing to us.

The Church teaches what St Paul was commending in the Philippians, that the apostolic spirit is an essential element in the spirit of Catholicism. St Paul prays that the Philippians will increase in mutual charity and in spiritual understanding and perception. Let us pray for that grace, too, that we may see what we are to aim at if we are to reach spiritual maturity in Christ.



Saturday of the Thirtieth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104):3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 1:18-26; Psalm 41; Luke 14:1, 7-11

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable: When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take

the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honoured in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 14:1, 7-11)

Sin One thing which ought strike any student of religion is how any person, however familiar with the things of God he may be, is vulnerable to the inroads of serious sin. The primordial example is Satan and his minions. If man wishes to think of sin and a sinful state, Satan exemplifies that state. He is the arch-sinner, the one who exudes sin and who is implacably opposed to God. But now, where did all this begin in him? It began after he had come from the creative hand of God, endowed with abundant blessings of nature and grace, a high spirit favoured with the presence of his Creator. He knew God and his holy will. Endowed with untrammelled freedom he made his choice – and the horror of it was that he freely rejected his Creator. He wished to be – as he would later successfully tempt our first parents – in God's

place. It was an attempt at usurpation, an absurd and shocking rebellion with other spirits following suit and in train, in which he crossed the Rubicon with his troops, against the Lord God. How could he have done this? It is the mystery of sin, but the point being drawn here is that he was fully equipped to choose the good, having come from the creative hand of God. He was familiar with the things of his adorable, infinitely loving and holy Maker. With that choice he made, the terrible divine sentence followed. He and his were forever cast out, only to continue in undying hostility. The entire Fact scarcely bears contemplating. But then, our first parents were endowed with high gifts of nature and grace too, and knew God and his holy will. Beauty surrounded them, and love was their prospect, but they too made their choice, and they chose to be gods in their own right, like God and independent of him and his will. Instantly they lost their life with God and were doomed to death, bereft of their gifts of grace and with a nature now impaired. Now, all this happened in the Garden of Eden, an idyllic state of familiarity with the things of God. It paralleled the state and moment in which Satan and the demons had rebelled.

Let us take another case, likewise of high mystery. The grandest and holiest of men was our divine Brother and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. What an incalculable privilege to be his personal friend and companion, to live with him day by day and to share in his interests and his work! Such was the calling of the Twelve, selected out of the concourse of his disciples who themselves had the privilege of being disciples of so unique a Master. The Twelve were his Companions, and they knew the privilege of it. They had left all to follow him. Simon Peter once asked our Lord, what will be coming to us, for we have left all to follow you – notice that he did not say, I have left all to follow you. He said, "we" have left all. He was speaking for the *Twelve*, implying that *they all* had left everything to follow him, and our Lord acknowledges it for he goes on to tell them what will be their recompense for doing this. Now, Judas was in their company when this was said – we may presume that Judas too had *started* well. He was received into the special friendship of Jesus Christ and lived and worked as his Companion. He was an Apostle, one of the Twelve. In its own way, it paralleled the Garden of Eden in which our first parents

were placed. It was the Garden of friendship with Jesus Christ, and St Paul writes that in Christ we receive every heavenly blessing. But look what happened! Judas turned away from God made man, from the pearl of greatest price, from the treasure in the field. He sinned gravely, enormously, and tragically failed to repent but went the road of despair. Now, I give these sad examples as an introduction to our Lord's words to the Pharisees in our Gospel passage today (Luke 14: 1, 7-11). They were men of religion, professionals – professing to know and to live according to God's Law – who were very familiar with the things of God. They had before them the Incarnate God and heard him speak and instruct. Despite this, they were sunk in sin, and as our Lord's words today show, pride gripped many of them by the jugular. Characteristically, they "picked the places of honour."

Let us live in the friendship of Jesus Christ, and while assiduously doing so let us understand well that we are vulnerable to temptation and sin. The one favoured by Christ with his friendship can still be unfaithful, and in numerous minor ways (at the very least) is

indeed unfaithful. He must work at casting off the sin that clings so tenaciously. He must aim at self-purification, detachment, self-denial. The struggle must be maintained to the very end, otherwise he will be caught napping and dragged away by the sin that lurks at the door. So then, now I begin!

A Second Reflection: (Philippians 1:18-26; Luke 14:1.7-11)

All for the Glory of God At times we come across people who seem to think they have nothing to live for, nothing that is worthwhile in their lives, nothing to look forward to. Others are living for things that are not worthwhile and that cannot last. They are utterly ephemeral. Let us notice, by contrast, what St Paul is living for: "*Life for me, of course, is Christ*" (Philippians 1: 18-26). His one hope and trust was that he would never be defeated in living for Christ, and that "*whether by my life or by my death, Christ would be glorified in my body.*" This is what we should be living for, that whether by our life or by our death, Christ will be glorified and honoured. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask that "hallowed be your name." It means

that we set ourselves the aim of so living and working, of so praying and even thinking, that Jesus will be everywhere known and loved. Even when we are incapable of living and working, if sickness and death are before us, that this too will result in God's glory.

Let us pray for the kind of humility that puts God first in everything. Our Lord in Luke 14:11 tells us that "*everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the man who humbles himself will be exalted.*" Let us learn to prefer the lower place especially before God, so that God and his Son Jesus will be exalted. In this way and in God's good time, we too will be exalted in him.



Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my
God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord,
my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Wisdom 11:22-12:2; Psalm 144:2;
Thessalonians 1:11-2:2; Luke 19:1-10

At that time, Jesus came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town. Now a man there named Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man, was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see

Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house." And he came down quickly and received him with joy. When they all saw this, they began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner." But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost." (Luke 19:1-10)

The Forgiveness of Sins In the first two chapters of the Bible we are presented with inspired images of man and his world coming from the creative hand of God. In the third chapter there is narrated the story of the appearance of a tremendous setback — sin. Man is created, and placed in the Garden but then rebels against his divine Benefactor. The inspired text shows us that sin, suffering and evil in the world did not

come from the hand of the Creator — it came from man himself. It came from man's own choice and decision to accede to the temptation of Satan. All went instantly awry, and the result is that man, the world's master, has the fundamental and mortal problem of sin. Sin, the root cause of all man's problems, if unchecked will lead to eternal damnation. Now, the modern situation is that people tend not to recognise sin. It is the great modern blindness. They see sin in others perhaps, though they call it by some other name such as wrongdoing or crime. But personal sin as such, which is to say, an offence against God — this they tend not to recognise. If they do recognise that God is offended by things that we continually do, they tend to think that this does not matter much anyway. This is because God does not matter much. Therefore we are not really sinners, and *if* we are — well, so what? Sin is not important — there are other things that matter far more. What matters more than God is this world, and it is this world which must not be upset. And so modern man tends not to believe or at least not take at all seriously what Christ has told us, and what the Church passes on to us, the immensely important doctrine of the

forgiveness of sins. In St Luke's Gospel scene of the conversion of Zacchaeus the senior tax collector (Luke 19: 1-10), Zacchaeus was very conscious that he was a sinner: he had a sense of sin. In this he was not a modern man, but in this he is a teacher of modern man. He responded to our Lord's offer of friendship by repenting. He knew he was a sinner, and because of his contact with Jesus Christ he came to believe in the forgiveness of sins. I suspect that Zacchaeus was a well-known member of the infant Church.

Luke points to Zacchaeus and says, here is a convert from *sin* who became a true lover of Jesus Christ. He learnt the fact and the doctrine of the forgiveness of sin. Every time we profess our Catholic Faith in the Creed, which we do after the homily at Sunday Mass, we proclaim our belief in the forgiveness of sins. But before we profess this faith in God's forgiveness of sin, we state that we believe in Jesus Christ and his salvation, in the Holy Spirit, and in the Holy Catholic Church. These doctrines are the foundation of our belief in the forgiveness of sins. Belief in the forgiveness of our sins is intimately

connected with our belief in the action of the Holy Spirit, who forgives our sins in and through the ministry and life of the Church. On the very evening of the day he rose from the dead, Our Lord grants to his apostles the gift of the Holy Spirit: especially to forgive sins. "*Receive the Holy Spirit,*" our Lord said, "*whose sins you forgive they are forgiven, whose sins you retain they are retained*" (John 20: 22-23). It was the first ministry the risen Jesus gave to his Apostles when they received the Holy Spirit from him. If we believe in Christ, if we believe in the Holy Spirit, if we believe in the Holy Catholic Church, we should believe in the forgiveness of sins — and with real conviction. At our Baptism, we receive this gift of the Holy Spirit and with this gift comes the first and full forgiveness of our sins in a manner so complete that there remains in us nothing left to efface, neither original sin nor offences committed by our own will. Yet the grace of Baptism delivers no-one from the weakness of nature and the proneness to sin that is the effect of Adam's sin. Thus it is that sin makes its re-entry into the soul of the baptized person, because in his weakness he goes on to choose to sin, either venially or mortally. Because of this, God bestowed a further

mercy. Our Lord gave to the Apostles the power to forgive sins committed after Baptism. This power given to the Apostles to forgive post-baptismal sin is handed on to bishops and priests and administered in the Sacrament of Penance.

Let us ask our Lord to help us gain a new starting point in our spiritual lives, which is a real conviction that we are sinners and need the forgiveness of God. Let us ask our Lord to help us to be as conscious of our sins and as ready to repent as was Zacchaeus when our Lord greeted him. Let us resolve to practise a daily examination of conscience, daily acts of sorrow for sin, frequent and regular confession, and to practise an apostolate of bringing to others the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins. That is to say, let us make this doctrine a living conviction in our lives.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 976 983

(I believe in the Forgiveness of Sins)

A Second Reflection: (Luke 19:1-10)

Sin and Love It has often been said that love is not a mere feeling: it is above all a decision. It is a matter of clear-headed choice. God loves us and reveals his love to us, commanding us to love him in return. With the thought of his undying love and the divine command accompanying it, we choose to love him in return — showing this love by our obedience. The question is, what are the foundations of this choice, and how can it be helped to flourish? To answer this question, I suggest that we consider today's Gospel, and in particular the figure of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). It is clear that Zacchaeus felt a real need for Jesus, for he ran ahead and climbed the tree to see him. Further, he was aware that he was a sinner. He climbed down from the tree and told Jesus that he would give his ill-gotten gains to the poor, and return what he had gained unjustly. He had listened to his conscience, and had accepted its reproofs for his sins. This sense of personal sin was very much at the source of his desire for Jesus Christ. He knew he was

spiritually sick, and that he needed salvation. On another occasion our Lord was criticised by the Pharisees for welcoming the sinners and eating with them. He said that it was not the healthy who needed the doctor but the sick, and that he had come to call sinners to repentance, that is, those who recognised they were sinners. Those who did not recognize they were sinners (such as many of the scribes and Pharisees) were unlikely to be deeply interested in our Lord. We remember our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the Publican praying in the temple. The Pharisee did not think of himself as a sinner, but the Publican was aware of his own sinfulness — and it was the Publican who went home reconciled with God. So did Zacchaeus in today's Gospel reading. He was a sinner, and he knew it. Sinner that he was, he recognised in our Lord his great holiness, a holiness that showed itself in mercy. His conscience, intimating his own sinfulness, intimated also the saving love of Jesus. So he looked to our Lord for something radically important that he did not have.

But then, apart from the action of his conscience enabling him to recognise his sinfulness and the holiness of Jesus, Zacchaeus met Jesus personally, and this meeting was due to the loving initiative of Jesus himself. So it was that Zacchaeus not only knew that he was a sinner and that he yearned for something better, but he discovered that Jesus loved him personally. That meeting with Jesus brought about the decisive change, the wondrous conversion which gave our Lord such joy. Zacchaeus had known he was a sinner and yearned for something nobler, but that alone did not bring about the great change — though it did dispose him for it. It was when he met Jesus and saw that Jesus loved him and wanted to dine with him, that he completely changed. As our Lord said, this day salvation has come to Zacchaeus. And what changed Zacchaeus? What gave him joy in his religion? What made him dedicated? What turned him honest, and led him to give to the poor? It was to have discovered the love that Jesus had for him in particular, for him, sinner though he was. Jesus stopped, looked up at Zacchaeus, called him by name, asked him to come down and speak to him, and then told him that he would be coming to his

house to dine. It is a most beautiful scene. Imagine were that event to have happened to any one of us! Zacchaeus felt loved by the best, the grandest and the holiest person of all. He became a true believer in all God had revealed and was revealing in Jesus. The fact that he is mentioned by his name would suggest that he was subsequently known in the Christian community, just as Simon of Cyrene would have been. Let us follow in the footsteps of Zacchaeus, humbly aware of our sins, desirous of something much higher and better, and in prayer discover the love that Jesus has for us, discover it and believe in it. We must discover it precisely as sinners. Our faith is above all faith in the love of God for us sinners. When we discover this, our faith is living and real, and not just an abstract notion. Let us every day strive to place ourselves, as the sinners we are, in the presence of Jesus who loves us.

St Paul wrote, *Christ loved me and delivered himself for me*. If we appreciate this, and make it the basis of all we do, it will change us, just as it changed Zacchaeus. Let us then put time into prayer, resting

in the presence of our Lord at the start of the day, often raising the mind and heart to him during the day, and living in the company of the One who loves us more, far more, than we do ourselves. The thought of God's love will change us.

Monday of the Thirty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 2:1-4; Psalm 131:1bcde, 2, 3;

Luke 14:12-14

On a Sabbath Jesus went to dine at the home of one of the leading Pharisees. He said to the host who invited him, “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or sisters or your relatives or your wealthy neighbours, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14:12-14)

Being Repaid Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1670–1713) was an English politician, philosopher and writer. Shaftesbury is generally regarded as a writer hostile to religion. But his correspondence is said to show a belief in a God, all-wise, all-just and all-merciful, governing the world providentially for the best. He had definite ideas about a true religion and a pure morality – and as a result of these ideas he had contempt for some of the doctrines of Christianity. One of his well-known works was *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), a work

which John Henry Newman (1801-1890) chose to consider when, in one of his books, he analysed what he called the “Religion of Philosophy”. Newman writes that in his book, Shaftesbury rejected the motive of *fear of punishment* in the leading of a virtuous life. Newman, by contrast, taught that the conscience, a true foundation of the sense of God and of religion, prompts reasonable and authentic fear at transgressing divine commands. The conscience has a sense of foreboding when divine commands are transgressed, and this, for Newman, is an essential natural support for religion. Sanctions of reward and punishment are necessary – and revealed religion confirms this. For Shaftesbury it is *only* love of virtue *for its own sake* which is morally acceptable, and not the doing of things to gain reward and avoid punishment. Under Newman’s analysis it turns out that this position not only ignores the promptings of the conscience, but in Shaftesbury this “virtue” is simply a sense of beauty or utility. Newman writes that “*Sometimes he distinctly contrasts this taste with principle and conscience, and gives it the preference over them. ‘After all,’ he says, ‘tis not merely what we call principle, but a*

taste, which governs men'." This, Newman taught, is the religion of the "gentleman" and is basically a substitution or re-interpretation of the dictate of the conscience for a sense of beauty, or of what is fitting, or of what is useful – all of which turns out to be a religion or morality driven basically by self-respect. God is lost sight of, and it is the Self that is the object of the heart's concern. In all of this Newman regards the conscience as the typical foundation in nature of authentic religion and the sense of God. It is natural and to be desired that a person live well and religiously in order to *be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*

All of this fits in with natural everyday experience. Grace builds on *nature*. A student is exhorted to study hard and consistently in order to do well in life. There is the motive of reward for work. Failing this effort and diligence, there is the prospect of serious mishap – which is "punishment" for neglect. The laws of society have sanctions and it is understood that an important motive in getting citizenry to comply with laws is the motive of reward and

punishment. This is not to say that in religion one is never to rise above this to higher motives of love, but the fear of loss and the hope of gain will always be present in some sense. And this is confirmed by revealed religion – and specifically by the religion instituted by Jesus Christ. There is no prophet before him who spoke so much of heaven and hell awaiting the period of trial which is this life. In our Gospel passage today (Luke 14:12-14) we read of our Lord telling the leading Pharisees, *Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*” It suggests that a motive of their being preferential towards the poor is being “repaid” an eternal reward in the Afterlife. Our Lord’s parable of the Poor Man Lazarus and the Rich Man who ignored him is well known. They died and the Rich Man ended up in Hades, while the Poor Man ended up in the bosom of Abraham. It is plain from the parable that the future beyond this life should be an important thought in the conduct of life. In the 25th chapter of St Matthew’s Gospel our Lord gives his famous description

of the Final Judgment of all, when the Shepherd-King will separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be commended for having helped those in need and will go to their eternal reward, while the goats will be condemned for neglecting the needy, and will go to eternal punishment. Our Lord obviously means all this to be a motive for right action. During the apparitions of our Lady to the children of Fatima in 1917, they were given visions of hell – and it was awesome and horrifying. St Teresa of Avila, doctor of the Church, was once given a vision of her place in hell were she to fall from grace and die without repentance. So we ought think often and long about the great Eternity towards which we are all heading. Life is very short, and eternity is very long. It is everlasting – so we must get to heaven.

One of the many great priests of the twentieth century in America was Father Patrick Peyton. He led great crusades across the world promoting the family Rosary. I remember seeing him interviewed on the Catholic television network, EWTN towards the end of his life. He was asked about death, and he said that he was looking

forward to death. This was not because he was tired of life in the way some want to end their lives because of their difficulties. It was because he wanted to be with Jesus Christ. This is the great reward to look forward to. We read in the Gospels how, shortly before Christ's Passion, God the Father said on the Mountain, *This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.* That is to be our programme of life, and if it is, then we can look forward to life everlasting with him. In all of this, it is the mercy of God which is our hope and we have a wonderful example in the one who died near and with Christ. He said, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!* The wonderful answer came: *I tell you, this day you will be with me in Paradise.*



Tuesday of the Thirty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 2:5-11; Psalm 21; Luke 14:15-24

When one of those at the table with Jesus heard this, he said to Jesus, Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God. Jesus replied: A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just

bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' Still another said, 'I have just got married, so I can't come.' The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'

(Luke 14:15-24)

Heaven One of the factors in reaching a belief or conviction about something is its *antecedent probability*. I once read a biography of a remarkable nun in Papua New Guinea – she died in 1930, and it seems she was attacked in various ways by demons. The author of the biography had a chapter on the demonic and acknowledged that many

readers would regard such matters as utterly fanciful. In offering considerations to help make the satanic element plausible, he said that just as the world (and the atmosphere) is teeming with *invisible* microbes that pose *threats* to man, so it is *antecedently probable* that there is an invisible world which teems with invisible enemies (the demons). I am not suggesting here that his argument as such is good – I am simply referring to the use of this factor called *antecedent probability*. Because of one set of things which is clear and true, another set of things may be regarded as *antecedently probable* or likely. This likelihood gives rise to a reasonable expectation which allows one to believe something despite the lack of hard and strict evidence for it. For instance, an executive may have a secretary to assist him in his office work. This secretary gives indications (to her boss), in all kinds of little ways over a period of time, of *deception*. These indicators are all of minor significance, but they give to him an impression that she is a deceiving person. Suddenly some money goes missing in the office and at first it is assumed that someone has made a mistake in the recording procedures. But when all that has

been exhaustively considered, it suddenly occurs to the executive that there may have been a *theft*, and his strong suspicion falls on the secretary because of the impression she has gradually given of deceptiveness. There appears to him to be an *antecedent probability* that *she* is the one responsible for the disappearance of the money – even though there is no hard evidence initially. Then, when evidence is sought, it all comes together and the theft by her stands revealed. I do not wish to linger on this example – my point is to suggest a particular point. For many, their experience of life would *not* intimate to them the *likelihood* of an eternity of *bliss* hereafter. They may never advert to the matter in a seriously philosophical or theological manner. Life for them has its joys and its sorrows, its frustrations and its disappointments – and it is *not* such as to lead them to think there is the likelihood of an Afterlife of *utter happiness*.

Across the ages religion has been typical among an immense diversity of cultures and societies. The conviction of the existence of the divine (of some kind) and the unseen world is common. Even

Buddhism at a popular level seems to involve prayer to “deities” of a sort. But still, the expectations regarding *great happiness* in the Afterlife have been but modest. This perhaps reflects the expectations of many for this life. Then there is modern secularism, in which great portions of populations assume that this world is all that there is. I have met the occasional elderly person who thinks that the end of human life involves extinction, after the manner of the animal. I remember one of Australia’s richest businessmen had a tremendous heart attack, followed by, he thought, an after-death experience. On the basis of this he claimed to be able to assert that there was “nothing there” – and no judgment after death. How tragically misguided his thoughts! Now, whatever of natural expectations, divine revelation as brought to us by the Patriarchs and the Prophets and above all and definitively by Jesus Christ, is wondrous. It far, far exceeds all that man would have thought to be *antecedently probable*. We are called to a share in the very life of God here, and to a scarcely imaginable eternal life hereafter. Commonly, Jesus Christ describes it in terms of a great *banquet*. And so we are brought to our Gospel passage today (Luke

14:15-24), in which a man prepares his banquet, and wishes large numbers to come to it. *When one of those at the table with Jesus heard this, he said to Jesus, Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God. Jesus replied: A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'* God has an eternity of bliss planned for his creatures, and for man in particular. He intends us to join him in a *great banquet*. *Eye has not seen nor ear heard all that God has in store for those who love him.* We just must think of this a lot, and fill our hearts with a great desire for what God has planned for us – after all it is his own great desire in the first place. The wonderful prospect is that if we strive to please God by keeping his commandments, repenting when we sin and starting off again, then heaven is before us. After death we shall be purified in Purgatory, but heaven remains our prospect.

May I suggest that every day we pray for the grace to please God now and especially at the hour of our death. An excellent prayer is

the “Hail Mary”. *Hail Mary! Full of grace! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.* In this prayer we address ourselves to the Queen-mother of heaven and earth, praising her with the words of Scripture. Then we ask for her prayers now and at the hour of our death. We are praying for the grace of final perseverance. The one thing necessary is that we persevere in the grace of God as we reach our last moment here on earth and depart for our meeting with the all-holy God. Heaven! Let us not miss out on it! How terrible a result that would be, and how wondrous a gain if we gain that.



Wednesday of the Thirty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 2:12-18; Psalm 26; Luke 14:25-33

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters- yes, even his own life- he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money

to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14: 25-33)

Giving Up All When we read this Gospel passage (Luke 14: 25-33), the final sentence stands out: "*In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple*" (Luke 14: 33). What can this mean? we ask. It is plain that it cannot only or even primarily mean that in order to be Christ's disciple we must renounce *all* ownership of material possessions. To take but one example, we read in the Gospel that Jesus loved Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Lazarus was not one of the Twelve, and Martha and Mary do not appear to be among

the women who ministered to Christ and the Twelve on mission, assisting them from their own resources and with general housekeeping. They lived in their own home and carried on with their normal life, but were close friends and disciples of Jesus Christ. He loved them, and we read of his visit to them once, when Martha was doing the serving and Mary the listening. But notice this, that all this happened in "their" house. They were true disciples of Christ, and Mary's absorption in his words while Martha served, showed this. But Christ did not expect them to "give up" their home to be his disciples – in the sense of renouncing ownership of it. Simon Peter and Andrew also had *their* home after they had left their nets in response to his call to follow him. Christ visited Simon's home, and perhaps even stayed there, making it the centre of his operations. Christ is not referring only or necessarily to the renunciation of material possessions. This may be the path of this or that or many of his disciples, while not being the vocation of others. What Christ is requiring in our passage today is something more difficult. He is asking for a total detachment of the heart. The heart must give full place to Christ, if one is to be truly his

disciple. When Christ speaks of giving up all of one's possessions, he is speaking of all that the heart can possess and prefer in place of him and his holy will.

Of course, the love of material possessions can indeed stand in the way of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. While Mary, Martha and Lazarus were not in any way expected by our Lord to sell up and get rid of all their material possessions, the case was not the same for the rich young man. Our Lord extended to him the priceless invitation to sell all, give to the poor, and then to follow him. He would be on the path to perfection if he did this. But he was not prepared to give up his material possessions, and so he went away sad. However, there are other forms of attachment which can be just as, and even more, intractable. The fact is that one can be quite prepared to give up one's car, but altogether unwilling to forgive. In fact, the *circumstances* of life can more easily train a person in detachment from *material possessions* than in detachment from other things. Material possessions can fail, be lost, be stolen – due to circumstances. If these things

happen we have to learn detachment, otherwise we shall be unhappy. But what is to be said of, say, forgiveness? One can brood on injury for years and years in all sorts of circumstances, with little to challenge the resentment. It is very easy to go all through a long life and never truly forgive, right to the point of death. One might never give up a desire for some revenge. These are the "possessions" which, more than the car or the house, some grasp so tightly. Every time the memory of the injury arises in one's mind – with the call to "give up" the desire for revenge, or the call to "give up" the special esteem of others – one finds oneself grasping at it even more tightly. One never seems able to give up this possession that is so close to one's heart. One never learns to "love" one's enemies, precisely because of what the heart is unwilling to give up. That is to say, there are many more things embraced by our Lord's dictum at the end of our Gospel passage today than mere material possessions. And in any case, our Lord does not say that it is simply material possessions that he is thinking of. These are important in the whole issue, but our Lord means far more than the bare letter of his counsel.

We shall not be able to give up for Christ all that we have without the aid of God's grace. I would very much recommend the practice of saying a brief prayer each day for the grace to become holy in life, and for the grace of a holy death. It will require that we give up all. We must give up everything for the sake of Christ if we are to be granted success in seeking such sublime and spiritual goals. Let us pray for this grace, assiduously practising the habit of a daily examination of conscience, noticing what must be given up if Christ is to be the Lord and master of our life.

A Second Reflection: (Philippians 2:12-18)

Our Salvation At this time we often think of the "last things." We think of the faithful departed in Purgatory (All Souls Day), and the day before this we think of all the saints in heaven (All Saints Day). These two days remind us of the all-important issue of our salvation. There is nothing to be compared with it in importance, and our salvation is not simply assured. That is, we cannot just take it for granted, although many people do. It is possible to lose our souls, which would be an

utter, unredeemable, and unmitigated disaster of eternal proportions. So then, as St Paul says (Philippians 2: 12-18), "*work out your salvation in fear and trembling*", which is to say, taking the whole matter with the utmost seriousness. This we do, nevertheless, with the joy that comes from being in and with Christ.

This is the will of God, St Paul says in another place, *your sanctification*. So we must, we just must, take all the steps that are necessary day by day to achieve this objective.



Thursday of the Thirty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 3:3-8; Psalm 104; Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable: Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully

puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15:1-10)

Christ and Sinners

Years ago I knew a shearer – one whose occupation was to shear wool from sheep – who would leave his town on the Monday and return on the Friday or Saturday after spending the week on some sheep property. He never missed his Sunday Mass, and one Monday when he was travelling to his workplace for the week, he happened to be with a companion-shearer. His friend half-mockingly

said that he heard that he went to church on Sundays – implying that he must think himself "good" for doing this. His Mass-going friend replied, "Look, Bill, I don't go to Mass because I think I'm good. I go because I know I need to." In other words it was precisely because he knew he was a sinner that he went to Mass every Sunday without fail. One often hears criticism of the all-too ordinary spiritual calibre of so many church-going Catholics. In their ordinary lives they are hardly impressive. Their sins are very obvious. At the time when the Anglican Newman was feeling the intellectual pressure coming from the claims of the Catholic Church, he had recourse to the perceived lack of sanctity in the ranks of ordinary Catholics. Where are your saints? Where is your sanctity? he asked rhetorically – and it is a valid and good question. The Church's vocation is sanctity, and its business is to produce saints and those who are on the way to sanctity. In fact, as all know, there have been numerous saints in the life of the Church, and the celebration of their sanctity has been itself a point of criticism of the Catholic Church by onlookers and critics. However, it would be a distortion of the plan of God to object to there being many sinners

within the pale of the Church, for God has revealed himself in Christ to be welcoming of sinners. In fact, all members of the Church are sinners to a greater or lesser extent, and the saint is the one who, recognizing himself to be a sinner, by the grace of God renounces his sins and pursues the path of ongoing combat with all sin. In a sense, the Church is precisely the place where we would expect to see sinners gathered together. Why is this so? This is so because the Church is where Jesus Christ her Head is to be found, and Christ attracts sinners.

In our Gospel today (Luke 15:1-10) we see a strange paradox so typical of Gospel scenes. One would expect that if the Son of God were to become man, all-holy as he was, it would be those recognized as religious who would be flocking to see and hear him. The ones recognized by the nation to be religious were the scribes, the Pharisees, the priests. But the ones most hostile to him were drawn precisely from that class. The ones, on the contrary, who were flocking to see him were the ordinary folk, and in particular many “sinners”. It turns out, then, that God is such as to attract sinners to him, once he reveals

himself for who he really is – provided the sinners in question genuinely desire something better than what they have and are. In our Gospel today "*the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus.*" They were "*all*" gathering around Jesus to hear him. They were very close to him, pressing on him. They felt entirely welcome. It seemed to them that Jesus very much liked having them near him, and each felt individually welcomed. This was so noteworthy a characteristic of the impression Jesus unfailingly gave that on one occasion when Jesus was dining in the home of a leading Pharisee – one regarded as a very "religious" person – a notorious sinner boldly entered the house to be with Jesus. She stood before him in tears, and washed his very feet. Sinners who wished to do better had no doubt of the reception he would always give them. Here was a great prophet who loved sinners, and all the sinners knew it – all those, that is, who knew that they themselves were sinners and wanted a better life. Christ looked with delight on their recognition of their spiritual condition and on their floundering efforts to be and do better. He spoke publicly with commendation and admiration of the prayer of the repentant sinner –

such as in his story of the Publican praying in the Temple. One of the most surprising things that the true and only God has revealed of himself in Christ his Son is his loving compassion for sinners. Typically, Christ was surrounded by sinners who were seeking to hear him. He required, though, that they hear his word, *repent*, and put his word into practice.

Rudolf Otto famously described the religious experience as being the experience of a reality that is *tremendum et fascinans*. True, of course – and the terrible, awesome, winning, captivating nature of the divine is ever the substratum of religion. But the one only God has revealed a host of surprises in revealing himself. He is a trinity of Persons, and he is boundless love. His power shows itself in compassion and mercy. In particular, sinners who recognize their sin crowd forward to be with him and to hear what he is saying. They typically want to be with him. Not so the sinner who refuses to recognize his sin. Let us make the basis of our lives the Fact of a loving

God who has come to redeem us and take us out of our sin to everlasting sanctity.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 15:1-10)

Recognition of Sin Let us notice in Luke 15: 1-10 who were the ones who were "*all seeking the company of Jesus to hear what he had to say*". They were the sinners and the publicans. It is the Pharisees who in this text tell us that our Lord "*welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" They complained that our Lord delighted that sinners (i.e., those who knew they were sinners) were in his company. He welcomed them as one would friends, and dined with them. The sinners could see that our Lord's great holiness was manifest and genuine, and at the same time he, all-holy as he was, loved them and was truly happy to have them with him. They knew they were sinners, and at the same time they knew that they were loved and would be helped to be better than

what they were. That indicates to us what our Lord expects us to recognize in our turn. He wishes us to acknowledge our moral failures in respect to God and others, and at the same time our Lord's great love and compassion for us.

Therefore in our prayer with the aid of this text, let us place ourselves in the company of the publicans and the sinners. Let us resolve to use all the means our Lord gives us to grow in humility and in faith in his love.



Friday of the Thirty-first Week in Ordinary Time

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Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 3:17-4:1; Psalm 121; Luke 16:1-8

Jesus told his disciples: There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg-I know what I'll do so

that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.' The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. (Luke 16:1-8)

People of the Light John Henry Newman, beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in September 2010, was one of the most original divines in the history of England. He came from a very mixed family. He was the eldest of the children, and the saddest case among his siblings was his brother Charles. Charles' instability and eccentricity became apparent early on, and his father predicted that he would never make his way in life. That is to say, he would not be successful in pursuing a career,

living independently, contributing in a respectable manner and meeting his responsibilities satisfactorily. So it proved in the event. His case, and so many others like his, reminds us that we should indeed strive to do well in life – understanding such a phrase properly, of course. All readily understand that life must not be squandered, that it ought be pursued actively and constructively, that it ought be the source of achievements in some positive sense, that it ought be dedicated to "work" or to works. If it is not – if little is done with the life one has been granted – all know that such a person will not be happy. Positive and constructive work, initiatives for the sake of the good, is a precondition of true joy – understanding "work" in the widest sense. St Bernadette Soubirous, to whom our Lady appeared at Lourdes in the 1850s, died in her early thirties as a nun at Nevers. She described her last illness as her last "job." Suffering is part of life's work, and one ought turn it to positive advantage. I remember seeing a most inspiring documentary film of a couple who had an extremely retarded child. That couple dedicated themselves unstintingly and with immense love to their child, and became heroic in their unselfish service. But

what was also obvious in this situation was that the parents were not the only ones with a great "work." The child herself had, in all her helplessness, a mission in life. It was precisely to draw out the virtue of her parents. The general point I am making is that all have work to do, whatever be their circumstances – and we are called to aim to get it done.

It is by no means uncommon to see people devoting themselves with great energy to their work. They know that if they are to get on, they must do this. If the student is to get into university, or more precisely, into the particular faculty leading to the career he has set his heart on, he must study hard to meet the standard of entry. Many work with tremendous energy at their professions, or at their businesses, or at their personal and private interests and hobbies. History provides plenty of examples of persons whose work in life consumed them. Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have commonly put in eighteen hours a day at his work. Well now, in our Gospel today, our Lord notes this very fact and draws an unfavourable comparison with those who

know what are the true goals in life. Bonaparte, man of genius with immense energy, spent his not-very-long life rising from his Corsican obscurity to being briefly the iron-fisted master of Europe. He over-stretched himself in his unremitting work and it fell to pieces. But he certainly worked, and while his star lasted, he worked with great intelligence. His goals were entirely centred on this world and on the benefits it could afford him. Our Lord has this to say of such persons – look at how shrewd, how industrious and effective they are in attaining their limited goals! They work, and very many of them work well – but of course it is for this world alone, and this world is passing away. But what are the *children of light* doing? Are they working with similar energy and intelligence for what they know to be the true goals in life, those goals revealed in God's revelation? *I am the Light of the world*, Christ said. The one who follows me walks in the light. The one who does not, walks in the darkness. What are the people of the light doing about this? Their efforts compare, he says, rather poorly with the industry and enterprise of the children of this world. In our Gospel today (Luke 16: 1-8), our Lord tells the story of the dishonest

steward. His master was going to throw him out. Before he did, the steward outwitted his boss by fiddling with the books and winning friends in the process – friends who would help him when he was gone. He was, many would say, pretty smart. He had his head screwed on.

God expects "the people of the light" to be smart. The true goals of which they are perfectly aware, must be sought and attained. We must work at our faith and at our union with Christ with persevering energy and intelligence. We must work at the mission Jesus Christ gave us in life, which is not only to do well in a material sense (God wants us to do well in this, to a point too), but to bring him to the world of our everyday lives. Our work in life is to share in his life and in his work – and this we do in a manner appropriate to our calling and to the circumstances God in his providence has placed us in. Let us not be outdone by people of the world, then!

A Second Reflection: (Luke 16:1-8)

Spiritual Astuteness People put a lot of time and thought into preparing for the future. Parents go to great lengths to make provision for the education of their children because of its importance for their future. They themselves take well considered steps to make adequate provision for their own retirement. But how many make provision for what will happen after death? Our Lord tells the parable of the shrewd and deceitful steward (Luke 16: 1-8) reminding us that people who think of their own selfish and temporal interests can be very astute and successful in achieving their goals. Yet those who have been given the true light to see beyond this world and prepare for it, all too often fall far short of worldly people in astutely attaining those goals they know to be the true ones.

We must constantly bear in mind what are the true goals in life, and determine with the aid of the grace of the Holy Spirit and the light of the Church's teaching, the means to attain them. It comes down to following daily in the footsteps of Christ, putting on his mind, taking up our cross and following in the footsteps of the Master.

Saturday of the Thirty-first Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 4:10-19; Psalm 111; Luke 16:9-15

Jesus said, I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. (Luke 16: 9-15)

Loving Money It scarcely needs saying that we must earn and acquire money or its equivalent, because we are material and temporal beings, sustained by the material universe of which we are a part. In the first

chapter of the Book of Genesis God entrusts the world to man and commands him to increase and to manage the earth for his own benefit. If we are to attain our natural ends and serve God in life, material resources will be necessary to a greater or lesser extent – and so money or its equivalent will be necessary. A lot of time in life has to be spent in acquiring money – or its equivalent – because we need material sustenance and resources. Our Lord needed money and he spent a lot of time seeking it. For the first thirty years of his life he lived as a typical villager and together with his foster-father Joseph, served as a carpenter-builder. He supported the small family circle by his paid work. That alone shows how central and important the business of acquiring money is. We must do it. When our Lord left his working profession and devoted himself exclusively to his public ministry, he still needed some money. Judas kept the common purse, managing the money that Jesus and the Twelve needed, were given and otherwise acquired. We read that several women assisted the travelling band with their practical help and personal resources. They contributed money. Simon Peter was asked if his Master paid the temple tax, and

he said that he certainly did. We read in the Gospel of St John that while our Lord rested at Jacob's Well at Sychar, the disciples went to the nearby village to *buy* some food. Where did the money for this come from? They had funds – some money was necessary for the operation of which they were now a part. When St Mary MacKillop went to Rome to gain approval for the religious Rule of her congregation, the Holy See insisted that the budding religious community have the canonical power to acquire money and material possessions. This was not in accord with the original intent, but God expects (and wants) us to have money in some sense for the prosecution of his holy will and his glory. Of course, all this ought be plain.

The problem, though, is that we can miss the point. The point of money and material possessions is to enable us to do God's will (such as, in the case of Nazareth, to support the family circle) and to further the glory of God. That is the point, but if we do not exercise vigilance over our hearts and watch our unfolding goals in life, money will become the object of our heart's love. Money should help us to love

God the more by enabling us to serve *him* with effect and dedication. But the human heart being fallen as it is, money can result in our loving God the less. It can become the means of a flourishing self-centredness, rather than a means of a loving service of God. It can become a god – a minor god perhaps, although at times it can become the one and only god in a person's life. This is that love of money which our Lord condemns in today's Gospel (Luke 16: 9-15). God's first commandment is that we acknowledge him as the one only God, and not to have other gods in our life besides him. He and he alone is the Lord our God. But as fallen creatures, we can so easily devote ourselves to the acquisition of money instead. All this is to say that a great challenge lies ahead of every man and woman. It is to become detached from material possessions and totally attached in one's heart to God. Our Lord is severe about it. *"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, You are the ones who justify*

yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight" (Luke 16: 9-15). The Pharisees loved money, we read. Their hearts, then, were profoundly divided, and this was, doubtlessly, a factor in the hardness of their hearts towards Jesus Christ. What this means is that we must resist in our lives that love of money which supplants the supreme love for God. We are to love God with all our mind, heart, soul and strength, and this the love of money destroys.

You do not love money? Well, how do you react in your heart when you are called on to give some of your money away to the poor? How do you react when your money is lost because of some circumstance? Is your heart found to be attached to money? If it is, it is probably feeding and bloating your egoism, and stifling your love for God. It is a very good idea to cut down on unnecessary material possessions and needless personal funds, precisely to lessen the chance of becoming attached to that money. It is also a very good idea, if possible, to give to the poor whenever asked. Apart from the good thus

done, it will help protect the heart from that love of money which our Lord condemns in today's Gospel. Love Jesus Christ above all, then!

A Second Reflection: (Philippians 4: 10-19)

Attachment to Jesus St Paul makes a remark in today's passage from Philippians (4: 10-19) that is a source of reflection: "*full stomach or empty stomach, poverty or plenty. There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength.*" That is to say, whatever be our circumstances, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. So we can be confident in the face of circumstances, which is to say confident that God will not allow us to be separated from him and his holy will by them. Our greatest foundation is the love of Jesus Christ. Therefore we ought strive to maintain a detachment from everything except our union with Jesus. Our attachment to things should be an attachment to them in Jesus. We love our family, and everything else that we should love in this life in Jesus. Whether

things are good or bad, we ought turn all our circumstances into opportunities to love Christ the more. For this we can depend on the grace of the Holy Spirit.

As we reflect on the fact that we do love Jesus (if it is the fact that we do), and that despite the course of events of life our love for Jesus has endured and grown, we ought be confident in the future action of the Holy Spirit in our regard. He will do the work. As is written on the tomb of Saint Mary MacKillop: *Trust in God!*

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Maccabees 7:1 2, 9-14; Psalm 17:1, 5 6, 8, 15;

2 Thessalonians 2:16-3:5; Luke 20:27-38

Some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, came forward and put this question to Jesus, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us, If someone's brother dies leaving a wife but no child, his brother must take the wife and raise up descendants for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman but died childless. Then the second and the third married her, and likewise all the seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. Now at the resurrection whose wife will that woman be? For all seven had been married to her." Jesus said to them, "The children of this age marry and remarry; but those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. They can no longer die, for they are like angels; and they are the children of God because they are the ones who will rise. That the dead will rise even Moses made known in the passage about the bush, when he called the Lord, ' the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac,

and the God of Jacob'; but he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive." (Luke 20:27-38)

Family Holiness The question the Sadducees put to our Lord represented their objection to the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. In his answer (which demolished their riddle on their own ground of the Pentateuch), Our Lord refers to "those judged worthy of a place in the other world and in the resurrection of the dead." Such a remark reminds us that heaven is our goal. In the Old Testament book of Maccabees (2 Maccabees 7: 1-14), a whole family – a mother and her seven sons – suffered martyrdom rather than violate God's commandments. This was an outstanding *family* of martyrs, saints of the Old Testament who put God and his will absolutely before all else. There are saints who were married, and whose spouses were far from being saints. There have been individual parents who are saints and who have had among their children a saint. Bridget of Sweden is a canonized saint, as is one of her daughters, St Catherine of Sweden. There have been child saints. St Maria Gorretti was not yet a

teenager when she died. Nor were Francisco and Jacinta Marto, both now beatified. There have been teenage saints, such as St Stanislaus Kostka, so admired by St Mary MacKillop. Dominic Savio died just short of fifteen years of age, and is canonized. There are some married couples who have been beatified and canonized. The parents of St Therese of Lisieux, Louis Martin and Marie Zélie Guérin, have been canonized (October 2015), and Popes have said they would love to canonize more married couples. Pope Benedict XVI once said he would love to canonize a child. But now, what of the ideal of, not only both parents being saints, but all the children too? The martyred family of the Book of Maccabees provides us with an example. The Christian ideal is that the *whole* family, parents and children, seek and attain high and heroic sanctity. This is clearly the purpose of God's plan and the Church's teaching. The Church teaches that every baptised person is called to holiness of life, and that the family is a domestic church. All members of a Christian family are called to a common holiness.

Whether or not a whole family is ever formally canonized, in fact it is the will of God that all members of every family seek a *canonizable* sanctity, even if in the providence of God formal canonization is never contemplated. The Christian family ought be the training ground for great holiness in its members. But of course, this has to be *desired*. That is to say, essential to the acquisition of sanctity is a *powerful desire* for it, and that *desire* is itself the gift of grace. Now, a signal help to gain and then maintain the *desire* for union with God and personal holiness here on earth is the very thought of *heaven*. Our Lord refers to heaven in our Gospel today (Luke 20: 27-38) when he speaks of those judged worthy of a place in the other world. It ought be the principal and common objective of the Christian family to attain a high place in heaven, and heaven is attained precisely by seeking to love and serve our Lord in everything. Companies and various corporations have commonly agreed goals. The attainment of heaven should be the goal of every married Christian couple, and it should be the goal that they have for all their children. But it seems that few families have this as the stated, commonly understood goal of the

family, spoken of and agreed to. The prize is heaven with God. Every family has a model of family holiness, holiness lived by all in the family, and that model is the Holy Family of Nazareth: Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Let every family put real thought into how it could make holiness and the generous love of God their commonly understood goal, governing the life of the family. Let them start with the *thought of heaven* as the goal for all, and make the Holy Family their daily inspiration. Let them resolve together as a family to do God's will every day, at home, at school, at work, in the parish, wherever. It ought not be simply the private hope and ambition of one or two in the family, such as the mother and a particular son or daughter. Let them *all* seek to please God as a *family*, whatever the cost. How different the Church and the world would be were this ambition to be common to Christian families!

The Christian family is a domestic Church. It should therefore be the home of Christian holiness, where all learn to know, love and serve God here on earth with their whole mind, heart, soul and

strength. Let us resolve to make that the family's goal, with heaven the common prize, and the Holy Family the constant inspiration and model. The whole family, and not just one or two in it, is called to holiness.

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1621-1654
(The Celebration of Marriage)

A Second Reflection: Luke 20:27-38

Heaven In our Gospel scene today (Luke 20:27-38), the Sadducees put to our Lord their puzzle, objecting to the doctrine of the resurrection. There was no resurrection, they thought. Our Lord quashed their sophistry, and proceeded to teach that there is in fact a wonderful resurrection. What a difference this doctrine of the resurrection should make! We could say that most religions have held

that there is some kind of Afterlife – shown, for instance, in prayer to and worship of ancestors. But in very many religions the Afterlife had little significance, and certainly few have envisaged the extraordinary and complete happiness which God has planned for us after we die, provided we obey him and are reconciled to him at death. Man had no idea of how much God loves him and, because of this, how important it is that he love God in return. As St Paul says, eye has not seen nor ear heard all that God has in mind for those who love him. Heaven will consist of knowing at first hand and seeing and experiencing directly, the boundless love of God for us. In heaven we shall see God face to face, the great, infinite God who is boundless power, kindness, tenderness, and mercy. He is almighty, and, as St Thomas Aquinas taught, his might and his power are shown in his mercy. His beauty is unlimited, as is his wisdom and goodness. Everything in God is boundless, for everything in God is God. When we think of what God has revealed of himself and of what he is like, it is not hard to understand why for all eternity we shall be utterly happy in his presence, without a trace of unhappiness or dissatisfaction. We have no

experience of the degree of happiness which will be the eternal lot of those who are saved. What a loss it will be, then, to lose one's soul! Eventually all of this happiness will be experienced in our bodies too, for as the Church teaches, we are reunited with our bodies at the last day, on the day of the General Judgment when this world as we know it comes to an end and is renewed in glory together with us. All will then be caught up in the glory that is of God.

The point is that we should live in the light of this great fact of our true future. Many think and act as if this world is all that there is. We should indeed live for this world, but in the sense that the duties that spring from our life in this world should be fulfilled extremely well. But our motive for dedicating ourselves to the building up of this world should be the thought of God and the world to come. The fact is that every bit of good we do here on earth will receive its reward in the world to come. How terrible it is to poison our efforts by choosing to do evil instead. A mother and father raise a large family for love of Jesus, at great cost and suffering, and depriving themselves of many

things they could have had otherwise. They will have their reward in the Afterlife, and, indeed, our Lord says that they will have it in happiness even here too. But it is this Afterlife, our life in heaven with God which the Gospel invites us to think of today. The person who in his daily work in the office, at his trade, at his studies, at home, or if he is out of work, serves God in some other way such as in his parish and for the Church, in order that God will be glorified and honoured – that person will have his reward. So let us think of heaven often and with great expectation. We were made by God to serve and love him here on earth so as to see and enjoy him forever in heaven. Heaven is our true goal, our true homeland. God has given us a longing to be with him in heaven where every tear will be wiped away, where we shall be with all those who are saved for ever and ever. We all have something wonderful to live for: it is *heaven*. This should also be a reason to engage in the apostolate of bringing the faith and the knowledge of these things to those who do not know them. There are many in the life of the Church and in different movements and organisations who are endeavouring to do this. What a tragedy, a catastrophe, for someone to

lose his soul, and what a tragedy if through indolence and inactivity, we ourselves have some responsibility for this loss!

So then, Heaven! Heaven! Life is short, and eternity is long. Bright indeed are our prospects. Let us not squander such boundless riches by taking the foolish course of sin. As God says in one of Christ's parables, *Fool! This very night the demand will be made for your soul. This hoard of yours, whose will it be then?* Let us make ourselves truly rich, rich in the sight of God, rich for Heaven.



Monday of the Thirty-second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Titus 1:1-9; Psalm 23; Luke 17:1-6

Jesus said to his disciples, "Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the one through whom they occur. It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he wrongs you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times saying, 'I am sorry,' you should forgive him." And the

Apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." The Lord replied, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." (Luke 17:1-6)

Scandals (*skandala*) In his booklet on Mary MacKillop, *A Spiritual Model for All* (1999), Eugene James Cuskelly remarks on Mary MacKillop's extraordinary journey of love and forgiveness in the face of injustice towards her. He observes that "in their anger, their bitterness, their disillusion (many people) stop on the road to holiness ... Few, very few, go on unscathed for to do so requires a veritable miracle of grace" (p.25). He says later (p.39) that "in God's wise ordaining we are called to love even our enemies. *Few of us do so*" (italics mine). Now, my reason for quoting these words is not to discuss here the wonderful spirit of Mary MacKillop, but to note that Bishop Cuskelly seems to imply that not many reach high sanctity because not many walk the path of persevering *forgiveness* and love for those who *wrong* them. Now, whether or not this is the case is not my purpose to discuss here – for, in

any case, it is a question of fact. However, prescinding from the matter of forgiveness and love for one's enemies, we are certainly reminded of the tragedy of any failure to follow Christ through and go the full distance with him. Sin and mediocrity is the true catastrophe of life, and our Gospel today (Luke 17:1-6) reminds us of some of the factors involved in it. At the outset of the passage we are told of the influence of one person on another in taking the path of sin. *"Jesus said to his disciples, 'Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the one through whom they occur. It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. Be on your guard!'"* Elsewhere in the Gospel our Lord solemnly warns against sin. It would be better to have one's eye torn out than to have two eyes and be cast into hell. Here, though, he is directing his words against those who lead others to sin. It is impossible that *"things that cause sin"* (*skandala*) not come, but *"woe to him through whom they come!"* This is a further reason for every person being on his mettle during life, for his deeds

will not only count in the divine judgment on himself, but they will count for their impact on others.

When we think of *skandala* – sinful actions that lead others to sin – a host of sins arise in the mind. The habit of profanity in speech, taking the name of the Lord in vain, can have its origins in what the offending persons have constantly heard in the speech of their family and friends. They have been led by them into such a habit, to which they have consented. Many other sins could be mentioned, such as corruption, embezzlement, theft, sexual immorality, injustice. Those who influence others by word and example along the path of sin, constitute "the world" in opposition to God. There are three great sources of influence fighting on behalf of sin and against the following of Jesus Christ. They are the "world," the "flesh" and the Devil. Christ in his opening remarks in today's passage in effect warns those who act as part of the "world" in leading others astray. Now, there is one most notable sin which we can forget, and our very passage today can serve to remind us of it. Our passage today would appear to consist of a few

distinct sayings: the warning against those who do things that lead others to sin (*skandala*), the saying on correction and forgiveness, and the saying on faith. *Increase our faith*, was the request of the Apostles. All through his ministry our Lord insisted on the central importance of faith – faith in Christ's almighty and loving power, and faith in his word. Time and again, he asked those who requested a healing, Do you *believe* I can do this for you? Unless you see signs and wonders you will not *believe*! I tell you, in all of Israel I have not seen *faith* like this! Go, your *faith* has saved you. Seeing their *faith*, he said to the paralytic, Friend, your sins are forgiven. He could work no miracles there because they had no *faith*. This is the work of God, to *believe* in the one he has sent. Now, how great the sin of one who leads a person away from *belief* in Jesus Christ! The foundation of all is this belief, and how tragic to lead a person to sin against faith, and to abandon Christ and his Church. Many have been thus led astray out of the foundation of the one true Faith. "*Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the one through whom they occur.*"

Increase our faith! Let us so live our faith that others will be led to the faith, and led to live it deeply, led to make it the foundation of their whole lives, and led to seek its perfection in sanctity. Let us not, by our mediocrity and our sins, be the cause of *skandala*, things that "cause" or influence others in the direction of sin, *especially sins against faith*. Wherever we go in life, we shall take others along with us to a greater or lesser extent. What a tragedy if we draw others along with us away from God.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 17:1-6)

Fulfilment of Our Responsibilities I remember watching an interview on television with the actor Charlton Heston. He believed that one of the most serious deficiencies these days is a lack of a sense of responsibility. It is obvious that we ought strive to gain a lively sense of what we are responsible for, and a determination to meet those responsibilities. There are tasks in life laid on each of us, and the welfare of many is dependent on our doing all we can to fulfill them. There will be consequences for those people and for ourselves if

we do not meet them. Our Lord gives us two examples in Luke 17:1-6. We are never to lead astray any of the little ones, and we are to correct the person who is doing something wrong. *"It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone put round his neck than that he should lead astray a single one of these little ones. Watch yourselves!"* One modern saint (St Josemaria Escriva) pointed to the donkey tied to the water wheel. The donkey's sole task was to go round and round the water wheel ensuring the water got out to the crops. The donkey, of course, did not see the point of it and its work was simple routine. But so much depended on that donkey's daily task.

We must fulfil our God-given responsibilities with love for God and dedication, no matter how routine and pointless they might seem. Thus will our work be sanctified, and in that sanctified work, we and others will be sanctified.



Tuesday of the Thirty-second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Titus 2:1-8.11-14; Psalm 36; Luke 17:7-10

Jesus said, Suppose one of you had a servant ploughing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have

done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' (Luke 17:7-10)

Duty At various times I have remarked on a conversation I had with a fellow-student many decades ago. He was in the seminary with me, though he eventually set aside thoughts of the priesthood and went on to study medicine. He became an eye-specialist. That conversation turned on philosophy and I remember him saying to me that the one thing he wanted was to be happy. I have never forgotten that statement of his because of its manifest truth. Every human being has the innate desire to be happy, and it would be very ominous in a person were he to desire *not* to be happy. The whole of mankind, age after age, desires to be happy. Analogously, we may say it is characteristic of all living things – but of course, non-human living things do not *know* that they seek that flourishing which may be called a form of “happiness”. An animal seeks to satisfy itself on a variety of levels of its life. It seeks to satisfy its hunger. It seeks shelter, (often) the companionship of those of its species, and many other things. It is seeking what we might call its

“happiness”. A non-sentient living thing such as a tree seeks to live and to flourish. It seeks (through its roots and its leaves) its nourishment and it grows to its height. It does not seek to be stunted and to die – it seeks to live, produce and propagate. “Happiness” is the quest of all. So in a sense, to say that the one thing I want is to be happy is not a very illuminating statement – absolutely true though it be. All things, in their own manner, would say the same thing. When it comes to the human person, while letting that statement stand as true, we must think around it. That is to say, we must look for something else that is more distinctive to man and which is essential to his happiness. Now, while the yearning for happiness is constantly present in man’s heart, there is another prompt which is constantly present in his heart too. Indeed, it is essential for the attainment of his happiness. I refer to the *sense of duty*. No living tree nor any other non-sentient living thing has a sense of *duty*, of course – even though in its own way it constantly (though blindly) seeks its own flourishing or “happiness”. No animal can be said to have a sense of duty or responsibility. Its behaviour may at times look like it – as with a dog which protects its owner. But all

know that an animal cannot be held responsible for its actions. It is driven by instinct, and however developed the instinct may be, still, the animal is always governed by it.

Yes, we may certainly say that every man and woman seeks to be happy. But a more illuminating statement is that every man and woman is *subject to duty* and will find happiness in its fulfilment. If a person has little or no sense of duty, we all know that there is something quite seriously wrong with that person. It is a damning statement to say that he does not know right from wrong. It is an indictment on him to say that he does not think right and wrong are objective – that they are just subjective constructs which one projects on the outside world for whatever reason. The whole of society is founded on the sense of duty – and not simply on the universal desire for happiness. People are recognized as subject to duty – the duty of obeying laws, for instance. There are powerful sanctions for the violation of what society considers and proclaims to be duties. You have a duty to respect the life and property of others, and if you do not you will be severely

punished. An animal that harms property or persons is not “punished” for failing to meet a responsibility. Pain may be inflicted on the animal following its action, but its point is to train and condition it. It may be even killed as a result of its actions, but all know that it could not help doing what it did. Perhaps its owner will be held responsible. Of course, there are hazards in this as in any perspective. When it comes to the sense of duty, for very many people their sense of duty is governed by what the laws of the land allow. If the nation’s laws allow for abortion and same-sex “marriage”, then many will consider that no duties are violated if one procures an abortion or enters into a same-sex “marriage”. But the point I am making here is that the sense of duty and the fulfilment of responsibility are essential in the idea of the human person. It is not enough to say that the human person has a fundamental desire for happiness. The practical and abiding question is, *how* is happiness to be attained? This is answered especially by addressing the sense of duty: *what should I do* in this or that case? All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Luke 17:7-10), in which our Lord speaks of the fulfilment of duty. *Jesus said, Suppose one of*

you had a servant ploughing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? So the master would not say to the servant – be happy, sit down and eat. Rather, do your duty to me. So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'

This is not to say that the flourishing of human life is a matter of merely doing one's duty. But our Lord's words remind us of the centrality of duty and responsibility. It is a true basis of human happiness. It ought lead to the earnest desire to fulfil the will of God and to perseverance in the fulfilment of it. And what is the will of God? It is that we *love* him to as much perfection as is possible for us. The whole of the Law and the Prophets, our Lord tells us, hang on two commandments, that we *love* God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and that we *love* our neighbour as ourselves. So the sense of duty and the yearning for happiness find their joint fulfilment in a life

of *love for God and neighbour* that is lived according to revealed teaching.



Wednesday of the Thirty-second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Titus 3:1-7; Psalm 22; Luke 17:11-19

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, Jesus, Master, have pity on us! When he saw them, he said, Go, show yourselves to the priests. And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and

thanked him- and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Then he said to him, Rise and go; your faith has made you well. (Luke 17:11-19)

Sanctity For All In our Gospel scene today, our Lord enters a village, and there from "afar" (*porrōthen*) stood a group of ten lepers. They were isolated from society, hopeless in their shared affliction, bound together by common distress and their companionship in misery. Disfigured, unkempt, poor, they had nothing to look forward to except a sad end together, shunned by their families and former associates. But there ahead of them was a wondrous portent, Jesus of Nazareth! He was approaching the village, he – their one hope! He could save them. We can imagine the clamour of their joint appeal to him, from the distance: Have mercy, have pity on us (*elēson*)! Their voices were weak and hoarse, but it was a magnificent prayer that was bound to strike the heart of God the Son made man. It is a prayer that the entire Church now prays in the penitential rite of every Mass. Jesus

commanded them to show themselves to the priests and off they went to do so. As they were going, all ten were cleansed. Imagine this event – a group of ten men sunk in the terrible disease of leprosy being suddenly transformed into great physical health. Thinking of the quality of the wine into which Christ had changed the water at the wedding feast of Cana, I like to think of the sudden health of the lepers as being of a high order. I presume they found themselves to be not only with transformed flesh, all corruption and disfigurement gone, but in excellent health generally. I imagine them all living productive lives within their families and neighbourhoods during the years that followed, some of them perhaps becoming important persons back in their home villages. I imagine the last of them dying decades later, surrounded by children and relatives, having experienced the blessing of a miraculous transformation of prospects on that day years before, when they met Jesus on the road outside the village. But did they become disciples of their extraordinary Benefactor? It seems not – for they did not even return to speak to him, or to give thanks, or to praise God for what he had done in Jesus.

Ah, but there was one exception. Samaritans did not associate with Jews, but in this sad situation the Samaritan leper had gained sanctuary with fellow-lepers who were Jews. Perhaps his misery was greater, being the only Samaritan among them. He, though, finding himself physically transformed, was beside himself with gratitude and praise of God. We read that "*seeing that he was cured, returned with a great voice glorifying God.*" It suggests that as soon as he saw that he was cured – immediately, without any delay – he came back to Jesus praising the goodness of God at the top of his voice. Doubtless he attracted attention as he returned. Glorifying God, he reached Jesus (who was now in the village) and fell at his feet. There was total abandon in his actions as he expressed the profound gratitude of his spirit. He fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. Incidentally, have we been somewhat like the other nine in our response to the many blessings we have received from God? To what extent does the action of the Samaritan encapsulate our lives? Have we been full of praise and thanks to God for blessings received? But let us observe Christ's reaction. Not only did he notice that only one of the ten returned giving

praise and thanks to God, but that this single person was a Samaritan. He was a foreigner and a heretic. He was not, we might say, a member of the then true Church – the chosen people of Israel, but he was more grateful than all his former companions who were Jews. Elsewhere (John 4:22) our Lord says to the Samaritan woman that "*you worship what you do not know. We know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.*" But that did not prevent those Samaritans, heretics and foreigners, from surpassing (in this instance) the response of the Jews. Many in the village of the Samaritan woman responded magnificently, acknowledging Jesus to be the saviour of the world (John 4: 42). On a different occasion again, Christ tells his hearers that the faith of the centurion far exceeded those in Israel, and that many from east and west would come to take their places at the table of the Kingdom, while the children would be cast out (Matthew 8:11-12).

There have been many "Samaritans" (those not of the true faith) who have entered the one true Fold and who have gone on to exceed in faith and sanctity those raised in the Faith from childhood. There have

been many raised in other religious communions who converted and went on to become canonized saints. They remain models of the Christian life to the rest of the Church. Let us think of, say, St John Ogilvie, raised a Calvinist, and martyred for the Catholic Faith in Scotland. Let us think of St Elizabeth Seton, raised an Episcopalian, converted to Catholicism, and now a canonized saint of the Church. Let us think of John Henry Newman, leading Anglican theologian of his day, convert to Catholicism, now beatified. Sanctity is open to all the baptized. All are in the running. Let us not be left behind, then, but run the race so as to win.

A Second Reflection: (Titus 3: 1-2)

The New Evangelization St Paul tells Titus (Titus 3: 1-2) that he should remind his people *"that it is their duty to be obedient to the officials and representatives of the government, to be ready to do good at every opportunity; not to go slandering other people at every opportunity; or picking quarrels, but to be courteous and always polite to all kinds of people."* They are to live out their Christian faith in

Christ, with all its obligations, there in the midst of the world in which they live, every minute of every day. It was this which led eventually to the victory of the Christian faith over the Roman Empire, nearly three centuries after much persecution. It was because the ordinary lay Christians carried Christ and his teaching into their everyday life of work and family and society that the Faith spread.

This is the key to a new evangelization of our postmodern society and culture. In this sense ours is the age of the laity: each member of the faithful must bring Christ's love and message to the world by bringing it to the whole of his own everyday life. Thus will the world be evangelized from within.



Thursday of the Thirty-second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philemon 7-10; Psalm 145; Luke 17:20-25

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you. Then he said to his disciples, The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. Men will tell you, 'There he is!' or 'Here he is!' Do not go running off after them. For the Son of

Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. (Luke 17:20-25)

The Kingdom Within When I was serving in South America many years ago, I knew Church people, including priests, who seemed to understand the goal of their ministry to be the liberation of people and society itself from oppressive social structures. A newly constructed *society* had to be introduced, replacing the present *system*. They were inspired by a theology and an image of liberation, and the liberation seemed to be primarily social, economic and political. I clearly remember talking to one priest who was committed to this, and the biblical image that fired him was that of the children of Israel being liberated from their oppression in Egypt. On God's command to Moses, they were brought out of slavery to the Promised Land. Something very similar had to be done for the society in which he was working. Now, there was much that was truly noble in this, for the people, the Church's poor, were truly oppressed by society's

structures. There needed to be great changes in society, and it was a demand of justice and charity that this be done. There were a couple of things I noticed about this, though. Firstly, in respect to the poor, many who were fired by the thought of oppression, appeared to think almost exclusively of the *structures* of oppression, and not very much of attention to the little, unnoticed *people* who were thus oppressed. Whereas, it was to the unobserved individual poor person that, say, Mother Teresa's sisters of charity seemed to give their attention. But more importantly, *Christ* seemed to have been largely forgotten. The liberation set forth by the Old Testament loomed larger than that of the New. There were those who wished to liberate the poor from their oppression, and who wished to identify with the poor in their way of life as part of this, but who did not seem interested in identifying with Christ as such. They wished to live at one with the poor in their poverty, but were uninterested in living in union with *Christ* in his poverty – which especially involves poverty in spirit. In fact, such talk as this struck them as spiritual pie-in-the-sky. The nitty-gritty of life was the practical business of changing society and getting rid of

oppression, not primarily that of bringing the Person of Jesus Christ to all, especially to the poor.

There never was a doubt in my mind that this was a subtle yet radical perversion of the Gospel. It is absolutely true that the Church is committed to alleviating poverty and, to the extent possible, of ridding life of oppression. Christ himself did this. On one occasion after he had cured a poor woman of her long-standing and hopelessly bent physical frame, he asked his critics, would not any of you release your ox of its oppressive situation on the Sabbath? Why not this woman whom Satan has held bound all these years? The Church has an extensive and profound teaching on social justice that commands charity and justice towards the poor and the oppressed. But first things first. The first thing is the Person of Jesus Christ – he is the Blessing of blessings, far surpassing in value the blessing of social or economic liberation. He brings union with God and liberation from the most radical oppression of all, which is that of sin. By nature we are under the power of sin, and it is sin which, at root, has brought suffering and

death to mankind. If the poor are not liberated in the first instance from sin and granted the blessing of union with God in Jesus Christ, then all other blessings are somewhat beside the point. First things first, and the first thing is Jesus Christ. The Church was founded in order to bring this Blessing of all blessings to the world and to every member of the family of mankind. There have been countless persons over the twenty centuries since the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ who have been intolerably oppressed precisely because of their adherence to him who was their Lord. They were hunted down, imprisoned, tortured, and put to death by ghastly and inhumane means, simply because of their acknowledgment and profession that he, Jesus Christ, is man's true Liberator. He is the only Saviour of the world, and the only way to the Father. If we want to be liberated from oppression, we must begin by entrusting ourselves to Jesus Christ. It is on this basis, and in union with him, that we devote ourselves to the integral liberation of others.

Where is the Kingdom of God? Does it consist in the promised land to which the children of Israel were taken by Moses, out of their oppression in Egypt? No. That promised land was a harbinger of the Promised Land to come. The Kingdom of God consists, at root, in union with Jesus Christ, and it flourishes in a life of love for God and neighbour, which is the authentic Christian life. It extends in a civilization built up on the basis of Christian love. It is a civilization of love and justice, with the life of God pulsating within it, and imparted from on high by means of union with Christ. In its essence, "*the Kingdom of God*," as our Lord says in today's Gospel, "*is within you*." As St Paul writes, this is the mystery revealed, *Christ in you, your hope of glory*.

A Second Reflection: (Philemon 7-20)

Treat Others As We Would Christ St Paul's brief and personal letter to Philemon is concerned with a very particular matter. St Paul, let us remember, is writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit speaks to us too as we read this letter. St Paul asks

Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive him, Paul himself. Now this reminds us of the spirit which ought prevail throughout the Christian community. It is said that pagans of the early centuries remarked of the Christians: how they love one another! This was an important factor in the victory of Christianity in the Empire. While there is plenty of evidence in the letters of St Paul that many Christians were not noted for their love for one another, Paul's words in this letter to Philemon remind us all that we should be noted for our justice and charity. We should treat others as we would treat Christ, for our Lord regards as being done to him whatever we do to others.

Let us appreciate our responsibility to bear witness before the world to the love of Christ, in the way we treat one another.



Friday of the Thirty-second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 John 4-9; Psalm 118; Luke 17:26-37

Jesus said, Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day

the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no-one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no-one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left. Where, Lord? they asked. He replied, Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather. (Luke 17: 26-37)

Law and Punishment

I have heard it said that a fundamental starting point and interest of the Muslim mind is *law*, and in particular, of course, *Muslim law*. *Law* in the Muslim mind would appear to be an ultimate and unquestionable category, and to the Christian this may appear to be so much the case that, in situations of dialogue with Islam, it is placed beyond discussion. I mention this merely as an introduction to the great fact of law in the life of mankind. In the matter of ultimate categories, one would surely argue that the very existence of things is

the most basic principle of all. It is closely followed by essence, because nothing can be but must be of a certain nature or kind. That being granted, *law* is undoubtedly a central feature of the life of mankind and the universe. The moment man arrives at a stage of self-reflection and reason, he discovers and is confronted by *law*. He sees that he must not do this, and must do that. His conscience tells him that this is to be avoided, and that is to be done or may be allowed. All through his upbringing he is met with regulations and the sanctions that accompany them. He comes to own his own vehicle, and regulations appear to right and left. *Law* is everywhere, more often warning of punishment on violation than promising reward on compliance. The reward of compliance to law is the right to continue on one's present course, with the benefits this brings. If one does not comply with the law, not only will the present course be blocked, but sanctions will be imposed by lawful authority. Sanctions can be severe, and can include the very loss of life. But in all this, one thing is to be noticed – and this is actually my point here – that people of every time and place take law for granted, whether or not it is viewed as the ultimate factor in their

thinking. The fact of law in society is accepted, as is the threat of sanctions from society if there is non-compliance. We all accept this threat, and actually regard it as a benefit. Revealed Religion is no different in this respect from ordinary life. The theme of *divine law*, revealed by God himself to and for his chosen people, pervades Revealed Religion. Furthermore, if man does not obey, there will be divine punishment. It is the most "natural" thing in the world.

When one reads the Old Testament, the imposition of law and the threat of punishment for non-compliance is seen to be frequent and obvious. God placed the Man in the Garden to cultivate and care for it. But then he gave him an order: he was not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The moment he chooses to eat of it, he is doomed to die. It was a capital offence, and yet the Man and the Woman chose to contravene this law, and they suffered the penalty. All through the Old Testament, God is warning his people to obey his law. If they refused to obey his law, he promises that his wrath will descend upon them. So much is this the case that it has often been said

that "the God of the Old Testament" is a God of law, punishment and wrath. He is contrasted with "the God of the New Testament" who is said to be a God of love and compassion. This, of course, is a caricature, which brings me to my second point – the first being the presence of law and punishment in life and religion. The second point is that Jesus Christ is shown in the Gospels to be a teacher of divine law and punishment too – he is in the line of the prophets and of the Old Testament generally. That is not to say that he is a teacher of law and punishment *only*. This would be manifestly absurd, for his revelation is that of the boundless *love of God*. But as with the Old Testament prophets who also taught the love of God for his people, Jesus Christ teaches constantly and consistently that God has imposed his law on man, and there are sanctions for non-compliance. There are capital offences which, if committed, bring death – although God can raise the dead. Our Gospel passage today (Luke 17: 26-37) is an instance of this pattern. Our Lord reminds his audience of the judgment of God on the people of Noah's day. *"It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the*

day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.” There is nothing mealy-mouthed about this. They were put to death because of their sins.

It will be just like that, our Lord warns, when he comes again. Just as there was the judgment of God in the Old Testament, so there will be the judgment of God in the day of the Son of Man. Our Lord warns his audience: Remember Lot's wife! Our Lord decidedly does not say to his audience, all that business about God judging sinners that you have read in the Old Testament, well, that is rather passé – in fact, truth to tell, a bit of an embarrassment in view of what you see in me. No. It is all very much to be borne in mind. The thought of the divine judgment exercises the mind wonderfully, and *helps* to keep it focused on the greatest thing of all, *God's love*.

A Second Reflection: (2 John 4-9)

Love and Obedience One of the surprising things about some people who have years of life behind them is their contentment with

their own moral state. They think and say that they are good people and that they do no harm to anyone. I am thinking in this instance of those who, on their own admission, have neglected important religious duties. I don't go to Sunday Mass, but I am a good person. St John in his second letter insists that we are to love one another. But let us notice that he also says that "*to love is to live according to his (God's) commandments.*" That is to say, loving God involves obedience to him, no matter what the cost. Obedience to God will nourish a true love for him, and a true love for him will manifest itself in a careful obedience to him. How can the one who neglects his religious duties claim this?

Part and parcel of a love of God will be a sense of sin, a sense of our own sinfulness and of the ugliness of any disobedience towards God. Let us ask God to help us to be determined to love him by being obedient to him, and let us fight against sin and thus grow in love for him.

Saturday of the Thirty-second Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 3 John 5-8; Psalm 111; Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice,

so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' And the Lord said, Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? (Luke 18: 1-8)

Prayer For Needs Years ago I knew a mother of several children, a fine Catholic woman with a young husband. She fell sick with a dangerous cancer. Immediately several of her friends began earnest and continual prayer for her recovery. Her condition worsened, and the prayers were redoubled. Her friends would often gather together in her house, and pray for her together in her room. Finally she died of cancer, leaving her husband and several young children. What was to be said of the prayer that had been offered up in faith and hope by many of her friends? It must have been very pleasing to God because they took our Lord at his word and prayed with faith, without giving up. But in the event, it was not the will of God for that woman and her family

that her life be prolonged. God in his wisdom and almighty providence allowed the cancer to take its course – but the prayers must have served his saving purpose. God wants us to take him at his word and pray for what in his sight we think we need, and not (as the Greek puts it) "to faint." But of course, we cannot ultimately know what is best for us. In any case, it is obvious that God would not often, and with conflicting prayers rising before him, set aside the laws of the universe. Cardinal Newman, now beatified, at the end of his life observed that God generally answers prayer by extension and exaggeration. That is to say, he extends and exaggerates the circumstances and situations of the natural order in order to favour the needs we present to him. We continue to pray and at a certain moment God touches circumstances at a tiny yet crucial point, and the prayer is answered. We have lost a valuable item and we pray earnestly to find it. Soon after, a sudden thought leads to the right glance, and it is found. Bowel cancer is detected and prayers are begun. The surgeon is in excellent form, and the operation is entirely successful. At times too, God works miracles. But we must allow God to decide what is best, for

he alone knows. Christ appealed that his cup be taken away, but it wasn't. He drank it to its dregs, and the universe in hidden fashion began its new course. All depended on the Son of Man suffering, dying and rising.

We cannot take our Lord's words, directing us to pray with faith and perseverance, as a magic wand. Wave the wand, and the wish will be granted. We do not exercise a charm or spell over the laws of reality, as if we are wielding Excalibur, the fabled sword of King Arthur. In prayer we present petitions to a great Person, the Person in whose hand are held all things seen and unseen. Who can possibly know what is best, except the Creator who has revealed himself to be our Father? St Mary MacKillop's most constant prayer was that the "dear will of God" would be done. The fact that our Lord himself answered countless petitions, and taught (as in our Gospel passage today) us to pray for specific needs, shows that it is pleasing to God that we pray for what we need and want. But our fundamental prayer ought be that God's will be done. When the Spanish Armada was being

prepared, a vast concourse of prayer rose to heaven for success in the coming venture. It proved to be a spectacular failure and a terrible defeat. The religious battle for the soul of England seemed intractably elusive. Why did God not grant success? Man cannot say. In the same century, Islam was a tremendous threat to Christian Europe, and the Popes could not get the Christian powers to unite. Unceasing prayer began, and a coalition was formed under Don John of Austria. The battle was joined at Lepanto, and the Christian fleet was victorious, the victory being attributed at root to the intercession of Mary, Help of Christians. The cynical secularist, sceptic and otherwise unbeliever will say that all events are the product of natural forces, prayer or no prayer. Prayer may keep up spirits and give hope to the protagonists, but it does not affect the course of the world. Not so the testimony of Jesus Christ, and the Christian places his faith in Christ's word. Christ commands us to pray for all our needs, and promises that our prayer will be heard – but of course, in the way known best to God. Further, let us remember this. Christ has shown, in fact, that suffering is the greatest source of good in the world – if we suffer in union with him.

Let us pray perseveringly for all our needs, depending all the while on the "dear will of God," to use the expression of Saint Mary MacKillop. There is nothing in the world better for us than that God's will be done. How terrible it would be if, God knowing that to win the million dollar prize would be to our undoing spiritually and materially, we should win it! The critical thing we need is faith, faith in God's love and power. But as our Lord says in today's Gospel, "*when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*" (Luke 18: 1-8).

A Second Reflection: (Luke 18: 1-8)

Faith and Persistence in Prayer We understandably have considerable respect for people who, as we say, are able to get things done. But there is so much in life that seems to be beyond the control of anyone – except God, of course. This is why those are most special who, through their prayers, are able to get done so much of what is beyond our control. What, then, is the secret to effective prayer? Obviously, at root it is humility before God. There must be genuine love for him. At the same time, in our Gospel passage for

today (Luke 18: 1-8) our Lord mentions two qualities: *faith and persistence*. Firstly in our prayer we must truly believe that God has the power and the goodness to hear us. This is where, I am convinced, we so often fail. If this belief is real, we will then persist in our prayer despite his apparent delays. We do not know why God might be delaying, but our Lord's teaching is that we ought not give up praying simply because God delays. If we do give up - and so often we do! – it will be due to a lack of faith.

Let us ask our Lord for the grace of great faith that will enable us to pray with persistence, and so by our prayers bring down the blessings of God on so much that looks hopeless.



Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Jer 29:11, 12, 14 The Lord said: I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You will call upon me, and I will answer you, and I will lead back your captives from every place.

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God, the constant gladness of being devoted to you, for it is full and lasting happiness to serve with constancy the author of all that is good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Malachi 3:19-20a; Psalm 98:5-6, 7-8, 9;
 2 Thess. 3:7-12; Luke 21:5-19

Some were saying of the temple that it was adorned with goodly stones and gifts, and he said: "These things which you see, the days will come in which there shall not be left a stone upon a stone that shall not be thrown down." And they asked him: "Master, when shall these things be, and what will be the sign when they will begin to happen?" He said,

"Take heed you be not seduced; for many will come in my name, saying, I am he; and the time is at hand. Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and seditions, be not terrified. These things must first come to pass; but the end is not yet now." Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and pestilences, and famines, and terrors from heaven; and there will be great signs. But before all these things, they will lay their hands upon you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and into prisons, dragging you before kings and governors, for my name's sake. And this will happen to you for the purposes of testimony. Lay it up therefore into your hearts, not to meditate before how to answer. For I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to resist and gainsay. And you will be betrayed by your parents and brethren, and kinsmen and friends; and some of you they will put to death. And you will be hated by all men for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. In your endurance you will possess your souls. (Luke 21:5-19)

The End It used to be said that a characteristic of the modern age is *angst* – the prevalence of anxiety, especially fostered by a lack of *meaning* in life. Religion has been elbowed out by secularism, and the natural uncertainty of life is accentuated by a lack of spiritual and religious anchors. The Cold War following the Second World War has been replaced by widespread and horrific terrorism, intractable conflicts in the Middle East, and of course the numerous natural disasters of flood, earthquake and famine. Whether or not our time should be described as one of *angst*, one thing is certain – that there is nothing in this life that is ultimately secure, except God and what he has revealed. Our Lord in today's Gospel looked on the great Temple of Jerusalem, which at the time was one of the wonders of the world, and predicted that the time would come when not one stone would be left on another. Everything would be destroyed. For the Jews at the time, that could hardly be imagined. But it happened a generation after our Lord had gone from the visible scene. God is our one true security. Our Lord's words in today's Gospel invite us to think of what will be truly permanent, the lasting things we should live for and work for. Life is

short, eternity long, and God has made us for eternity. Every day we speed on towards that day which will last forever. Life hastens on, taking us with it whether we like it or not. There is the story of the bus driver who announced to his passengers that they were making very good time, but he was unable to tell them their destination! The question is, *where* are we heading, or rather, what *destination* are we choosing precisely by our daily choices? As we think of our Lord's solemn prediction, let us think of the end, of the last and final things. Are we on the way to life eternal? St Ignatius Loyola used to say quietly and repeatedly to Francis Xavier when they were both at the University of Paris, what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and then lose his soul? This repeated statement converted Xavier, who went on to be one of the greatest of all missionaries, and a saint.

Our Lord in the Gospel warns of disasters, persecutions and martyrdom. He predicts that his disciples will be hated on account of his name, and yet, he said to them, not a hair of your heads will be lost. Your endurance will win you your lives. Such a paradox suggests

to us that whatever might happen to us physically lasts but a brief moment when compared with eternity. God will raise us up, and in due course will raise us in our bodies, and we shall live forever. By patient endurance we will save our lives for eternity. St Thomas More, just before he was beheaded, wrote to his daughter, *though I lose my head, I'll come to no harm*. Blessed John XXIII, when he was a boy, memorized the words, "*Nothing is more certain than death, nothing more strict than the Judgment, nothing more delightful than heaven.*" That is exactly what God has revealed, what Christ has taught, and what the Church constantly insists on. St Augustine once wrote that we can't escape Hell simply by not believing in it. Rather, we escape it by believing it and by acting accordingly. St Ignatius of Loyola urged us to meditate on Hell so that if love for God is not sufficiently strong to keep us from going there because of serious sin, at least fear of Hell will. One of the three children to whom Our Lady appeared at Fatima was Lucy. She wrote her account of the vision of Hell that was granted her. It is horrifying. St Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises* advises us to picture the souls in Hell being burned in their

own wickedness, their screams and blasphemies against Christ and the saints, their corrupt stench of sin, their bitter remorse of conscience, their hatred of all that is good and holy, their cursing of God, and their refusal to repent. He wants us to remember that this earthly home God has placed us in for a brief time is the opportunity we have to begin again every day, to turn to God and to ask for his mercy, setting ourselves in his direction for eternity. He concludes a principal spiritual exercise by getting us to ask, *What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for him? What shall I do for him?*

In the Gospel of today (Luke 21:5-19) our Lord tells us that on this earth there will be sufferings. Nothing is secure. But by bearing all things patiently in the way God wants, by striving to do his will and daily repenting of our sins, our endurance will win us our lives forever in heaven. We are to fear sin, not suffering and death. Sin is the true peril, the true death. Sin separates us from God. Sin brings the ultimate death, whereas mere physical death, especially when undergone in union with Christ, is the gate to the glory of Heaven. So today let us

take stock, thinking of the last things, resolving to keep them before us
and to order our daily lives accordingly.



Monday of the Thirty-third Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Jer 29:11, 12, 14 The Lord said: I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You will call upon me, and I will answer you, and I will lead back your captives from every place.

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God, the constant gladness of being devoted to you, for it is full and lasting happiness to serve with constancy the author of all that is good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 1:1-4. 2:1-5; Psalm 1; Luke 18:35-43

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. He called out, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, Son of David, have mercy on me! Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be

brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, What do you want me to do for you? Lord, I want to see, he replied. Jesus said to him, Receive your sight; your faith has healed you. Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God. (Luke 18:35-43)

Praise Were I ever to have the time, there are some things I would like to investigate about the deities of the various religions of man, and in particular about their high gods. I have read students of Hinduism assert that the deities of Hinduism are manifestations of the divine which is ultimately one. It is said that proper and classical Buddhism does not allow for a personal Creator, let alone a loving one. Confucianism is said to be a-religious, but of course moral. It has always seemed to me that the numerous religious myths of classic Greek and Roman religion were imaginative projections of variants of human life. Now, in all these “religions” it is plain that there is prayer and worship, especially prayer of petition, and various gods were specialists in certain kinds of petition. The god of war dealt with

petitions of war. The god of the sea dealt with issues of safety at sea. But now, I would ask a specialist in comparative religion to what extent has the prayer of *praise* featured in the religious life of mankind? I suspect that, just as the gods of mankind's religions do not appear to be beings of unstinting and selfless love, a love that is prepared to suffer for man, so man's religious response to them does not seem to be notably one of praise. Doubtless there is praise in the myths and rituals of history's religions, but I suspect that it is not notable in extent, and I wonder if, wherever present, it is found to be ordered towards gaining a benefit from the god being praised. That is my suspicion, and it is an hypothesis that I would like to see tested with research. Be that as it may, when we turn to the Christian religion, praise of the one true God *abounds*. There is a great deal of petition – as must be the case for the prayer of weak and vulnerable man – but there is also a great deal of *praise*, both thanks and *praise*. The Psalms, to give but one obvious instance, are full of praise. Man instinctively turns to God in his need, but in the case of Revealed Religion man, in turning to God, discovers that God has already acted in his life. God

has taken the initiative, and so man asks the more – and he *praises* God the more.

In our Gospel today (Luke 18: 35-43), the blind man is sitting by the roadside begging, when amid the sudden concourse of people surrounding him, he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. He knows of Jesus of Nazareth, the great son of David – he is good, merciful and powerful before God. God is acting in him. The blind man is very aware that the God of Israel who has been so good to his chosen people in the past, is being good to the children of Israel in the Person of Jesus now. The blind man's whole being instantly responds to the news of Jesus. He unhesitatingly and vociferously appeals to Jesus, and his shouts prevail across the heads of the crowd. He is a child of Revealed Religion, and he knows that God is a God of love and compassion, a God who has shown this in the past, and who is showing it now in the Person of the great prophet near to him in the midst of the crowd. His powerful petition, repeated with insistence, is based on the proven love of God, a love gratuitously demonstrated time and again in

the history of his people. Jesus instantly stops, for his heart is a heart of compassion – and we can imagine the crowd around him slowly stopping in tandem with him. The voice of the blind man is heard again, and Jesus asks that he be brought to him. They meet, and then there is uttered the beautiful question of Jesus Christ that manifests the character of God so often revealed in the history of the chosen people: "*What do you want me to do for you?*" Now, I would revert to my previous question and ask to what extent has this question been asked by the gods of man's religions. Characteristically, do they take the initiative in asking this question, or are they – otherwise silent – importuned by the needs of man to respond? The God of Revelation, manifested in the face of Jesus Christ, takes the initiative in meeting wounded man, and asks how he can help him. The prayer of petition in Revealed Religion is *encouraged* by the loving initiative of God. But then all of this leads man to *praise*. So it is with the blind man – he follows Jesus glorifying God, and the crowds praise.

There are two great things we ought be doing in our prayer: asking God for what we need, and praising him for his merciful goodness. We ought ask, as did the blind man, with confidence in the goodness of God who has shown time and again that he wishes to help us. What do you want me to do for you? is the characteristic question coming from the lips of Jesus Christ. Our religion and our prayer is based on the revelation of the love of God for us. It ought lead to petition and to *praise* – praise that glorifies him for his goodness, and that leads others to praise him as well. Let us learn from Christ's wonderful question, and let us learn from the blind man who responds.



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Scripture today: Apocalypse 3:1-6. 14-22; Psalm 14; Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, come

down immediately. I must stay at your house today. So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner'. But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount. Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. (Luke 19:1-10)

Called By Name I remember some time back meeting an Archbishop among many people in a crowd. It was a friendly meeting, and he asked my name – and I gave it. Some time later I was in a situation in which, once again, I had occasion to meet that same Archbishop. To my astonishment he remembered my name. I asked him how he did it, and he said that he simply had a good memory. I thought he might have some technique such as connecting my name with some other image in his mind which would be triggered by the sight of me. But no, it was

just that he had a very good memory. On a later occasion again we met and once again, he remembered my name. I was very impressed. The point here, though, is the impression that this gave me. His remembering my name gave me the impression that he had a special concern, interest in, and liking for me. It was a mistaken impression in the sense that any interest in me he might have had certainly did not go beyond that which he had for each and all whom he met. He just had a remarkable facility for remembering names and faces, which he exercised with all and sundry. It was an excellent gift for any person to have and it certainly won friends. I myself felt as if I was a friend to him, simply because he remembered and knew my name. I felt influenced by him and disposed to be influenced by him further, because of the friendship I assumed existed between the two of us. This whole impression was based on his addressing me by my name. It is an intriguing and important feature of human relationships, the use of a person's name. It can be very embarrassing when we cannot remember the name of a person - and we usually try to hide the fact in some way. Imagine living with a person and never addressing him by name –

it would be preposterous. Now, this is a notable feature of Yahweh God's relationship with his chosen people. He has called them by name. "*Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine*" (Isaiah 43: 1). The Lord God goes on to assure his people that he will be with them. He has named them as belonging to him (vs 7).

It would be profoundly moving to be addressed by God, and to be addressed by name. In the Gospel of St Luke (and our passage today is drawn from that Gospel) the first words uttered from heaven involve addressing someone by name. In the first chapter, the first words spoken are those of the Angel, addressed to Zachariah: *Fear not, Zachariah (mē phobou, Zacharia)*. It must have been a profoundly moving feature of this apparition for Zachariah to have been addressed by name. An Angel had come from the throne of God to give tidings of joy. Zachariah would have a great son, and the Angel informed Zachariah of his name: you will call him by the name of John. The name came from heaven, and it came with the announcement of his

grand mission. The scene shifts to a different locality, and it is six months later. The same Angel Gabriel is sent to the virgin of Nazareth, Mary. He addresses her by name: *Fear not, Mary!* As with Zachariah, it must have been profoundly moving for Mary to have a messenger from heaven address her by name. She is informed by the Angel that her Child will have a name. She will call him Jesus. God addressing his people and his individual children by name is important in the Gospels. Consider that sad scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Judas steps forward to kiss Christ. Christ addresses him by name, and with love: "*Judas, do you betray the Son of man with a kiss?*" (Luke 22: 48). I suspect that it was precisely his being addressed by name that led to Judas's sense of the enormity of what he had done, and his subsequent collapse. Among the first words that John records in his Gospel as having been uttered by the risen Jesus was his addressing Mary of Magdalene by name: *Mary!* (John 20: 16). It is in this general context that we ought consider our Gospel today (Luke 19: 1-10), and in particular the first word that Jesus Christ addressed to Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector of Jericho - the one whom the crowd called a

sinner. Christ addresses him by name: "*Zacchaeus, come down immediately! I must stay at your house today.*" Zacchaeus had been called by name, and he rose to the occasion with gratitude and joy.

Though we do not hear it physically, Jesus Christ addresses each one of us by name. To this one he says, John! I must stay at your house today! To another he says, James, I must stay at your house today! Christ knows and loves each of us personally, and he knows and calls us by name. In one of his Letters, St Paul writes, Christ loved me and gave himself up for me. Christ had called Paul by name. His first word to Paul was to address him by name: "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*" Christ addressed Zacchaeus by name, and Zacchaeus converted, turning away from sin and receiving Christ into his home and his heart. He addresses each of us by name. Let us do the same as did Zacchaeus, turning away from sin and giving our hearts to Jesus Christ.



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Scripture today: Apocalypse 4:1-11; Psalm 150; Luke 19:11-28

While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once. He said: A man of noble birth went to a distant country to receive for himself a kingdom and then to return. So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. 'Put this money to work,' he said, 'until I come back.' But his

subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, 'We don't want this man to be our king.' He was made king, however, and returned home. Then he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it. The first one came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned ten more.' 'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.' The second came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned five more.' His master answered, 'You take charge of five cities.' Then another servant came and said, 'Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a piece of cloth. I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.' His master replied, 'I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? Why then didn't you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?' Then he said to those standing by, 'Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.' 'Sir,' they said, 'he already has ten!' He replied,

'I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away. But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be a king over them- bring them here and kill them in front of me.' After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. (Luke 19:11-28)

Accepting the King The procedure of a prominent man being granted a kingship was well known in the ancient world. A case in point was Herod the Great, who died during Christ's infancy – after attempting to eliminate Jesus after his birth in Bethlehem. Herod, born around 74 BC, was the second son of Antipater the Idumaeen. Antipater appointed his son Herod as governor of Galilee at 25. He enjoyed the backing of Rome. To cut a long and turgid story short, after Mark Antony marched into Asia, Herod was named tetrarch of Galilee by the Romans, but was subsequently overthrown by Antigonus who had the help of the Parthians. With that, Herod fled to Rome and won from the Roman Senate the recognition and title of King of the Jews. He then returned and, with the help of Rome, eventually

captured Jerusalem and then by Mark Antony's authority put Antigonus to death. With this he took command of Israel with the title of Basileus (king) in about 36 or 37 BC, ruling for decades and dying in 4 BC. He had effectively received his kingship from Rome, and always depended on that recognition. So too his son Herod Archelaus, who was made ethnarch of Samaria, Judea, and Edom from 4 BC to 6 AD. However, he was judged incompetent by the Emperor Augustus who then made Herod's other son Herod Antipas ruler of Galilee from 6 AD-39 AD. Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee during Christ's youth and manhood, and Christ was sent to him by Pilate at the commencement of his Passion. Antipas was an appointment of Rome. All this is to say that the Jews of our Lord's time were very familiar with the image of a man of noble birth going to a distant country to receive for himself a kingdom and then returning. As already said, Herod the Great had returned with his kingship from Rome and had put to death Antigonus his enemy. Well then, in our Gospel today our Lord uses this familiar scenario to respond to an expectation. We read that *"he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to*

appear at once.” Now, let us notice an important feature of the Kingdom of God – the attitude we have to the King.

It cannot but be noticed how often divine judgment and retribution appears in the parables and teachings of our Lord. Perhaps the most picturesque description of the Last Judgment is that given in Matthew 25, where the angels assemble the nations before Christ who is the Judge of all. The sheep are separated from the goats, and the decisive issue will be how each treated his neighbour. Those who treated their needy neighbour well will be received into the Kingdom. Those who did not, will be cast into the everlasting fire. Now, there are those who have said that all that will count is how we treat our neighbour. But let us notice how our Lord casts the words of the Judge: *"I was hungry and you never gave me to eat."* It is *Christ* whom we serve in serving our poor neighbour, and doubtless God wishes us to bear this in mind in a life of service. The greatest servants of the poor among Christ's faithful do bear this in mind constantly. St Vincent de Paul and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta had it before them all

day every day. The Christian is called to love and serve Christ his King and to do so constantly. It is *Christ* whom he loves when he loves the poor. In our Gospel today, let us notice what the judgment of the new king's servants and subjects turns on. It turns on their service and acceptance of him. He returns, now the king. He summons his servants and examines their service of him. Those who served him well, received a commensurate reward. The one who served him poorly, lost everything. "*Why then didn't you put my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?*" Then he said to those standing by, "*Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.*" Then he turned from his servants to his subjects: "*But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be a king over them- bring them here and kill them in front of me*" (Luke 19: 11-28). The Judgment turned on the faithful service or otherwise of his "servants," and on the full acceptance of him as king by his "subjects."

When Christ uttered this parable, he was about to embark on his journey to his heavenly Father. The Passion and Death of Jesus Christ

was nigh. He would leave for the distant land of heaven. Then he would come back, and when he did, he explained to his disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him. They were to go, then, and make disciples of all the nations. They were to baptize and to teach all that he had commanded them. History, then, revolves around *Jesus Christ* and the *recognition* of him as Lord of lords and King of kings. Let us resolve to follow him as the Master and Lord of our life, leaving behind all other masters who do not follow in his footsteps.



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Scripture today: Apocalypse 5:1-10; Psalm 149; Luke 19:41-44

As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace- but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one

stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God's coming to you. (Luke 19:41 44)

Suffering Any of our Lord's contemporaries steeped in the Scriptures would have been aware of the connection of sin with punishment. In chapter 3 of the Book of Genesis, God elicits from the Man and the Woman an admission of their disobedience. They had eaten of the tree which he had forbidden them to eat. He thereupon condemned the Serpent, and then the Woman, and then the Man, banishing Adam from the garden of Eden to till, with frustration and sorrow, the ground from which he had been made. Salvation, though, was dimly promised. So, sin had brought evil, suffering, punishment. The same point is made time and again throughout the books of the Old Testament. Jerusalem is destroyed and the population deported because of the sins and infidelity of the chosen people. In the minds of many, this meant that if one suffered it was due, and to a commensurate degree, to one's own sins. This was the position of the friends of the suffering Job, and has been commonly held by much of

mankind. So it is that we read in chapter 13 of St Luke that on one occasion when our Lord was teaching "*there were present some who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.*" Our Lord saw that they assumed that, because of the terrible and unique character of their death, they must have been greater sinners than all other Galileans. Because sin brings suffering, it was assumed that one's personal suffering is due, and commensurately due, to one's personal sin. *Do you think*, our Lord continues, *that those killed by the Tower of Siloam must have been greater sinners than all others in Jerusalem?* No, not at all, our Lord states. In these particular cases, no connection can be made between their personal sins and the tragedy that befell them. On another occasion again, St John reports in his Gospel (9: 1-3) that as our Lord was walking along, "*he saw a man who had been blind from birth. His disciples asked him, Rabbi, was it his sin or that of his parents that caused him to be born blind?*" Neither, answered Jesus. He was born blind "*to let God's works show forth in him.*"

However, this is in no way to deny that sin brings suffering and death – even though we cannot assume that, inversely, where there is suffering and death it is due, and due commensurately, to the personal sin of the one who is suffering. The Book of Job shows one who was just and yet who was suffering much. Those sufferings allowed God's glory to be shown in him. Satan burdened him with sufferings, but this was allowed by God as a test of Job's loving obedience – and Job was proved to be good by his sufferings. Still, sin results in suffering, for the sufferings of Job were brought on by Satan – and Satan is steeped in sin. Christ himself is the One par excellence who, being more just than all, nevertheless suffered more than all. But again, Christ's sufferings were brought on by sinners. His sinful persecutors caused him to suffer, and we too, who are sinners, caused him to suffer. He suffered because of our sin, and in order to take away our sin. The sufferings and evils of the world are indeed due to sin, but we cannot say, therefore, that any particular person who suffers, suffers because of his own sins, and to a degree commensurate with his own sins. He can be suffering primarily because of the sins of others. Nevertheless, one's

own sufferings *can* be due to one's own sins. In our Gospel passage today, Christ himself speaks of the coming destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem as due to the sins of the chosen people. "*The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God's coming to you*" (Luke 19: 41-44). Christ is speaking in the tradition of the great prophets who foretold the doom of the city because of the infidelity of the people. We must learn our lesson from this.

Many of our sufferings in this life could be part of a judgment of God on our sins, but no-one is permitted to assume this of those they see to be suffering. We do not know – and in any case, all suffering may be transformed, in union with Christ, into a process of redemption and sanctification. If we suffer with Christ, we shall rise with him. Suffering, if borne in union with the Redeemer, can sanctify us

and can sanctify the world. Suffering is also a moment calling us to conversion. It summons us to turn from sin and live in union with God and his holy will. Let us learn to follow Jesus Christ closely, bearing life's sufferings as his disciples.



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Scripture today: Apocalypse 10:8-11; Psalm 118; Luke 19:45-48

Then Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling. It is written, he said to them, 'My house will be a house of prayer'; but you have made it 'a den of robbers'. Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not

find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words. (Luke 19:45-48)

Reverence in the Church

In our modern period we tend to take holy places somewhat for granted. One of the striking things about England to a visitor is the vast number of venerable village and town *churches* there are across the country. The smallest villages have impressive and long-standing churches, which, sadly, are largely unfrequented. It bespeaks a past that was deeply Christian and Catholic in culture, a culture that crumbled and was replaced by one that is profoundly secular. A religious and Christian substratum is still there and can provide the foundation for a new evangelization, but the phenomenon I wish to point to is the presence of the village, town and city *church*. From the tiny village church, beautiful, solid, inspiring, to the grand and imposing Westminster Abbey and Canterbury Cathedral, what would England look like without its *churches*? The church is a pivotal component of the character and history of the villages and towns of England, and in this respect, England is typical of the societies and

cultures of mankind. It has been typical of a society that it has its temple, its place of prayer and worship, its holy place where its cultic leaders make contact with the divine on behalf of the people, and speak to the people on behalf of the divine. So it was with God's chosen people. When finally the children of Israel had settled in the Promised Land, with David as king having established its political identity and his son Solomon now upon the throne, a great *Temple* was contemplated, planned and executed. It stood for centuries, and in a special sense was the dwelling place of Yahweh among his people. But the people were not faithful, and so it was that the divine presence withdrew. The country was sacked by the Babylonians, its Temple destroyed, and the people deported. When the people returned many decades later, the first great task was to rebuild the *Temple*. The Temple, the abode of the God of Israel, was the centre of the life of the nation. The grandest project of Herod the Great was a spectacular rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem.

How our Lord loved the Temple! It was the House of his heavenly Father. More than a millennium before, God spoke to Moses at the Burning Bush. He told Moses that where he stood was holy ground. Christ viewed the Temple of Jerusalem as holy ground. In our Gospel today, our Lord quotes the Scriptures which speak of the Temple being God's House: *"My House will be a house of prayer."* The Scriptures themselves had, therefore, taught that the God of Israel abode in his Temple, and Christ confirms this by his own word – *"but you have made it a den of thieves!"* We can imagine the anticipation with which our Lord entered the Temple of Jerusalem. He had come there as a youth of twelve, lingering in it after his mother and foster-father had gone. How it would have pained him to see disregard for the divine presence there! So it is in our Gospel passage today (Luke 19: 45-48). Our Lord launches into the prophetic action of cleansing his Father's House and imposing religious observance, prayer, teaching and decorum in this most holy place. *"Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling. It is written, he said to them, 'My house will be a house of prayer'; but you have*

made it 'a den of robbers'. Every day he was teaching at the temple." A most obvious lesson for each of Christ's faithful is the observance of a profound reverence in the church. In every Catholic church where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, in an altogether distinctive and real sense the church is the house of God. Christ abides there in his full human and divine reality, under the appearances of consecrated Bread. It is Jesus Christ who is there, and there is with him the Father and the Holy Spirit and doubtlessly the angels of God. But what of the reverence that should pervade our churches? I am afraid that all too often it is lacking, and in its place there is talk and distraction. With what reverence ought we cease our conversation as we approach the door of the church and turn our hearts to God as we enter! With what reverence ought we make the sign of the cross, gaze in adoration towards the Tabernacle, genuflect, kneel to pray, and act as on holy ground.

For the Catholic Christian, the member of Christ's Catholic Church, the summit and source of religion is the holy Eucharist,

because the Eucharist is Jesus. This is the pivotal element, and it is this which is the overwhelming factor defining the character and significance of the Catholic chapel, the parish church, the diocesan cathedral, and the greatest of the churches in, say, Rome. The church is the house of the living God because of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament there. Let us all our lives be distinguished for reverence, that reverence which our Lord insists on in our Gospel passage today.



Saturday of the Thirty-third Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Jer 29:11, 12, 14 The Lord said: I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You will call upon me, and I will answer you, and I will lead back your captives from every place.

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God, the constant gladness of being devoted to you, for it is full and lasting happiness to serve with constancy the author of all that is good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 11:4-12; Psalm 143; Luke 20:27-40

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. Teacher, they said, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven

died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her? Jesus replied, The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'. He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive. Some of the teachers of the law responded, Well said, teacher! And no one dared to ask him any more questions. (Luke 20:27-40)

Resurrection There is much beauty in the world and much that arouses tremendous commitment on the part of men. It is a beautiful place, and generally people love life. They do wish to live. But they must face up to a mystery at the heart of all visible, living things. That

mystery is death. The greatest trees reach out in life and gradually spread their branches as if about to soar – but then finally they fade, wither and die. The planet is bustling with insect life, with animal life, with human life. But as surely as the sun rises, all that lives will die. Death cannot be avoided, and while we take this for granted because it is so universal and unavoidable, is it not a mystery why it is so? We take other things for granted too, without asking why they are so – for instance, the fact of the universe. Why is there a universe at all? We (unconsciously) assume that the universe has had to exist from the mere fact that it does exist, but plainly there is no inherent necessity for its existence. Why is there not *nothing*? There is nothing in things that requires that they exist, and the mere fact that they do exist does not itself require their existence. In similar fashion, a further question arises in our minds. Why is there *death* and why do not all things that live, continue to live? That is to say, why must they die? Now, a question like this scarcely ever occurs to the average person. Of course, many do not think much of death at all, and were they brought to the thought of death more often, it would be very good for them. But for so

many who do come to think of death and its inevitability, it is simply taken for granted – and understandably so. All men know, or ought to know, that all are under the power of death. Death is the inevitable end for all the living things that we see. What happens beyond death? Generally, the survival of the Self after death is seen to be a bleak and twilight affair, although some world religions offer a brighter prospect. The average secular-minded person would prefer not to think about his state after death, for, as he sees it, there is nothing after death to look forward to. It is the universality of death and its sombre implications that we ought keep in mind if we are to appreciate the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

The Sadducees approached Jesus with their objection to this doctrine. They insisted on a strict literal interpretation of the Five books of Moses, the Torah. In respect to the Sadducees, most of what we know of them comes from Josephus. He writes in his *Wars of the Jews* that they "*take away fate entirely, and suppose that God is not concerned with our doing or not doing what is evil; and they say that to*

act what is good or what is evil, is men's own choice, and that they may act as they please. They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades." While we cannot take the Sadduceean position as typical of mankind, nevertheless this is the context of our Lord's reply reaffirming the doctrine of the resurrection. Now, what must be especially taken to heart is that when our Lord refers to the resurrection, he means that there will be a total resurrection, body and soul of the human person. When he speaks of those judged worthy of a place in the other world and in the resurrection from the dead, he is not meaning by this simply that there will be an Afterlife with God. When Saul sought information about his coming battle, he went to the woman of Endor and asked her to call up Samuel so as to gain his advice. There was no doubt that the ghost of Samuel lived. In the ensuing conversation between Saul and the ghost of Samuel, one does not get the impression that Samuel is particularly happy – his spirit appears to be in a kind of twilight repose, not suffering but not in any special happiness, and he seems irritated that he has been disturbed. He has nothing but bad news

for Saul, and what he has to say leaves Saul distraught with terror. He then sinks back into Hades, where, it appears, his spirit will stay. There is no expectation evident that Samuel has any other future ahead of him. There were developing views, but the question about the resurrection of the dead was a pressing issue for God's chosen people.

Christ has assured us that all will be made new. His own resurrection to glory, body and soul, is a harbinger of what will come to mankind and to the world, if we cleave to Jesus Christ. God's plan is that we shall be in glory, body and soul, and that the universe will be glorious too. This will be our eternity, with the greatest joy of all being our sight of the Lord God. We can scarcely imagine a world in which death has been utterly banished. We imagine it best by thinking of the glorious Jesus, risen from the dead. The key to this fullness and flourishing of life is to attain union with him. Let us embrace this wondrous doctrine, and make it a driving thought of our life.



Feast of Christ the King of the Universe

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5:12; 1: 6 How worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and divinity, and wisdom and strength and honour. To him belong glory and power for ever and ever.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, whose will is to restore all things in your beloved Son, the King of the universe, grant, we pray, that the whole creation, set free from slavery, may render your majesty service and ceaselessly proclaim your praise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 5:1-3; Psalm 121;
Colossians 1:12-20; Luke 23:35-43

And the people stood watching and the rulers with them derided him, saying: He saved others; let him save himself, if he is Christ, the chosen one of God. And the soldiers also mocked him and approached him offering him vinegar, saying: If you are the king of the Jews, save

yourself. There was also an inscription above him written in Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. And one of those robbers who were hanging there as well insulted him, saying: If you are the Christ, save yourself and us. But the other rebuked him, saying: Do you not fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we are justly sentenced, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done no evil. And he said to Jesus: Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And Jesus said to him: Amen I say to you, this day you will be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:35-43)

The King It is difficult for the modern period to appreciate how feared the Turkish military might was in the West prior to and during the Reformation period. Many regarded the Turks as close to invincible. However, the tide turned with Lepanto. The Battle of Lepanto took place on 7 October 1571 when a fleet of the Holy League, a coalition of Spain (including its territories of Naples, Sicily and Sardinia), the Republic of Venice, the Papacy, the Republic of Genoa,

the Duchy of Savoy, the Knights Hospitaller and others, defeated the main fleet of the Ottoman Empire. The engagement was a significant defeat for the Ottomans, who had not lost a major naval battle for more than a century. While this did not stop the military and naval efforts of the Islamic forces, it constituted a decisive turning point. Especially critical for them was the loss of most of their composite bowmen, which, far beyond ship rams and early firearms, were the Ottoman's most fearsome weapon. British historian John Keegan notes that the losses in this highly specialised class of warrior were irreplaceable in a generation, and in fact began the demise of this particular tradition for the Ottomans. Historian Paul K. Davis has argued that this defeat stopped the Turkish expansion into the Mediterranean, and confidence grew in the West that the Turks, previously unstoppable, could be beaten. The slow military decline of the Islamic world can be dated as beginning at Lepanto. I mention all this merely as an image, a dim analogy for the defeat of sin and Satan *effected at Calvary*. Up to the intervention of God in choosing for himself a special people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, the forces of Satan and sin were

unbeatable. The Spirit of God continued to hover above the waters and move within the nations, but sin and death had entered the world, and the world awaited a Redeemer. His arrival was an imperative need. Finally the King of kings arrived, and at the commencement of his public ministry he was confronted by his dark Opposite. The battle was joined, and at Calvary the victory went entirely to the King. It spelled defeat for his Opposite, but till the end, his hateful Opponent will struggle to snatch all he can.

In our Gospel today (Luke 23:35-43) , the King of kings hangs from his Cross, jeered as one in ignominious defeat – but it was the greatest victory the world has ever seen. The forces of sin were broken. It will never be the same again, even though Satan and sin will struggle and skirmish unremittingly till their inglorious end. Christ's reign is still under attack by the evil powers, even though they have been defeated definitively by Christ's Passover at Calvary. Until everything is subject to him, the pilgrim Church of which we are members, travail while awaiting the full revelation of the triumph of the

Kingdom. That is why Christians pray, above all in the holy Eucharist, to hasten Christ's return by saying to him, "*Come, Lord Jesus!*" (Rev. 22: 17,20). It is why the first petition of the Lord's Prayer is that God's Kingdom will come. It has come in the Person of Jesus Christ, but its fullness and perfection is still coming, and the forces that were defeated still fight to get what they can before the end arrives. Let us not be snatched from the hand of the King, then! Entry into the Kingdom is effected by entry into union with Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is found in his Church of which he is the living Head. But according to the Lord, the present time is the time of the Holy Spirit and of witnessing to Jesus, and is a time of "distress." It is marked by the trial of evil which does not spare the Church. That is to say, while our King has conquered, and while his perfect victory will assuredly come, it is still a time of waiting and watching. Ever since the Ascension, Christ's coming in glory has been imminent, even though, as he himself said, "*it is not for you to know times and seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority*" (Acts 1:7). This final coming of the King of kings and Lord of all lords could be accomplished at any moment, even

if both it and the final trial spoken of by our Lord are delayed. The kingdom will not be fulfilled by an historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only through the Cross and through God's own victory over evil. Though beaten, Satan sustains his hate-filled efforts till the Last Judgment when God will entirely prevail.

Today is the feast of Christ the King, King of kings and Lord of lords. On him has been conferred all authority in heaven and on earth. The field is won, but the enemy fights on, getting what he can before being overtaken completely at the last. So we must every day take our stand with our King, with him who has loved us to the end. We must resolve to serve him and to follow him, doing all we can to make disciples of all the nations so that he will be acknowledged as the King. Let Jesus Christ reign, then! To him be the power and the glory forever! He once hung from the Cross, defeated, but entirely the Victor. He will come again as Lord and Judge, and then his kingdom will have no end. Let us stand by him then, and give every day to him.

Further reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2855-2856 (The Final Doxology); 1130 (The Sacraments of Eternal Life); 671-674 (The Glorious Advent of Christ).

A Second Reflection: (Luke 23:35-43)

The Example of Dismas Today we have before us the thought of Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords, hanging on the cross. There from the cross he invites us recognize him as our King, the King who redeemed us on his cross. We are sinners in need of redemption, and in today's gospel we have a marvellous model in the one who died at his side. He has popularly been given the name of “Dismas”, the Good Thief. I invite you to meditate on Dismas turning to Jesus as his King. Jesus was on the cross dying for the sins of mankind, while Dismas was on the cross, suffering for his own sins. He said to the other criminal that the two of them deserved what they got, but that Jesus had done nothing wrong. He recognized that he was a sinner and accepted as deserved the sufferings he was undergoing. He feared God. Between the two criminals was Jesus who was suffering for the

sins of Dismas himself and for the whole world. But notice this: Dismas recognized that the dying Jesus was the Messiah, and he turned to him as his King. He also believed that Jesus was about to enter his Kingdom. How did he come to this?

Our Lord said on one occasion, "*No one comes to me unless the Father draws him.*" We remember what our Lord said to Simon Peter on another occasion: "*Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in Heaven.*" Dismas was led to recognize Jesus by God the Father, who led him by a grace to which he responded. So he turned to Jesus, and what a wonderful request this dying criminal then made! He said to him "*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*" He recognized that Jesus, dying on the cross, was the long awaited Messiah, the King, who would establish God's kingdom. And he recognized that this dying Messiah was about to enter his Kingdom! And he also witnessed to the greatness of Jesus in what he said about him to his fellow criminal: This man has done nothing wrong! Then turning to Jesus he asked him to remember him when he

came into his kingdom. He asked for the gift of salvation from Jesus. He was the first fruit of the Crucifixion. Jesus said to him, *"Indeed, I promise you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* By contrast, the other criminal joined in the abuse of Jesus. Lacking a sense of sin and a fear of God, he did not recognize Jesus as the Redeemer, nor did he ask for salvation. We do not know whether he was saved, but we are absolutely certain that Dismas was.

Today on the feast of Christ the King, let us think of Jesus our King nailed to the cross, winning for each of us a place in his kingdom. Let us turn to him in the manner of Dismas, acknowledging that we are sinners, and asking him to lead us to holiness and to a place in his kingdom. Let us daily struggle for Jesus against the world, the flesh and the devil, and reach heaven in company with all others whom God places in our way. Let us make Jesus our King.

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Monday of the Thirty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84):9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Revelation 14:1 3, 4b 5; Psalm 24:1bc 2, 3 4ab, 5 6;

Luke 21:1 4

When Jesus looked up he saw some wealthy people putting their offerings into the treasury and he noticed a poor widow putting in two small coins. He said, "I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus

wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood.” (Luke 21:1-4)

I have my Mission Recently there was a video footage released on the media outlets showing a Russian journalist being set upon by two assailants. He was suddenly attacked, felled to the ground, and then kicked and stamped upon till he was near death. Something similar happened to the Catholic Church in England during and following the reign of Elizabeth I. For nearly two hundred and fifty years, England choked the life of the Catholic community till by, say, 1790, the Catholic Church in England had but a fraction of its numbers and strength from what it had been at the beginning of the sixteenth century. That is not to speak of the quality of many of its members. Bishop Richard Challoner, Vicar Apostolic of the London district at the time of Wesley, was a grand and saintly Bishop, but there is no doubt that by the time of his death (1781) the Catholic community was well and truly weak and on its knees in England. Within seventy years all had changed and the Catholic Church in England was in a

tremendous resurgence. What caused this? Many put it down primarily to the spectacular entry into the Church of Anglicanism's leading theological light at the time, John Henry Newman, and those influenced by him. But there was another factor, perhaps much more important. Challoner, the man who held the candle alight at the lowest point, predicted that a new people would come. A new people did come, but from a quarter that Challoner would not have expected – the Irish poor. The Irish poor poured into England following their catastrophes and famines, and this gradually changed the demography of religion in England (and Scotland). Broadly speaking, the Irish poor treasured their Catholic faith. Across the channel in the United States a strident Catholic voice was being heard – the convert Orestes Brownson. In a book review written in 1849, Brownson wrote that *"If, then, we mark a decided improvement in the tone and feelings of Catholics in England and in this country during the last half century, let us, who are of the old English stock, not forget to give the honour where, under God, it is due, to the piety, the zeal, and the steadfastness of the poor Irish emigrants."*

I mention all this as an example of a general point arising from today's Gospel passage (Luke 21:1-4). Our Lord is seated in the Temple, and he is watching those putting money into the Treasury. This included the rich. But then our Lord saw a poor widow approach the Treasury, and put in a negligible two tiny coins. Let us imagine her! Unnoticed, a widow – and therefore presumably without a secure income – clutching her two coins. Our Lord tells his disciples that those two coins were all she had to live on, but she put them into the Treasury. Our Lord tells them that in actual fact she put in more than all the others because she put in all she had to live on, whereas they put in what they had left over. That should tell us what counts before God. What counts in the working out of his Providence is that we give all to him, whether we are people of talent or not. Newman and his earnest followers did indeed give all they had to God, and Newman is the first to be beatified following the martyrs of the English Reformation and its aftermath. But Brownson had a very perceptive point when he brought forward the Irish poor as a factor in the flourishing of the Catholic Church in England and the United States

following the long penal period in England. Not all the Irish poor, by any means, treasured and lived their Catholic faith, but a great many did. They were like the poor widow of our Gospel passage, who, having little talent and opportunity, put in for God all they had. They were not afraid to practise their Catholic faith, which meant the Mass, their beads, invoking the saints, and venerating sacred images and relics. They were a vast concourse, very many of whom were, we might say, poor widows of today's Gospel. All this is to say that every single person counts in the plan and the Providence of God. No matter how much we might be a "nobody," there are no "nobodies" in the sight of God. Each, no matter how obscure and unnoticed, has his mission in life. That mission is irreplaceable.

In his posthumously published *Meditations and Devotions*, Blessed John Henry Newman wrote: "*God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. Somehow I am necessary for*

His purposes, as necessary in my place as an Archangel in his if indeed, I fail, He can raise another, as He could make the stones children of Abraham. Yet I have a part in this great work: I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling.” His words apply to all, including the widow.



Tuesday of the Thirty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84):9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 14:14-19; Psalm 95; Luke 21:5-11

With some people saying of the temple that it was adorned with valuable stones and gifts, Jesus said "These things which you see, the days will come in which there will not be left a stone upon a stone that will not be thrown down." They asked him, "Master, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign when they will begin to take place?" He replied, "Take heed lest you be seduced; for many will come

in my name, saying, I am he; and the time is at hand. Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and seditions, do not be terrified. These things must first come to pass but the end is not so soon.” Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in divers places, and plagues and famines and terrors from the heavens, and there will be great signs.” (Luke 21:5-11)

Let Us Prepare

I remember decades ago attending an address given by the editor of a Sydney daily newspaper that had a very wide circulation. He said that his work was to market news. News was his product, and his job was to find ways of selling it. I have often thought that few people realize the power of the media in forming the minds of people and of populations. When Pope Paul VI visited Sydney at the end of 1970 he addressed the journalists in French, telling them that they were *world power number one*. News, and commentary on the news, has dominated culture for much of the modern period, but one question that may be asked is, what is the impression left on people and

populations of the *meaning and destination* of history? Day after day we are inundated with the latest news. There is this and that local or national conflict, this and that famine, earthquake or political upheaval. There is an ongoing succession of local news, interesting tit-bits, significant political, economic and social happenings, and world events. But what is it all adding up to, in ultimate terms? Such a question would rarely enter the minds of many persons who assiduously follow the news in the press, on their televisions, radios, or on-line. The world is commonly thought to be a mere succession of events, more often than not in some crisis, and lurching on and on as might one drama after another. Time and history is a mere succession, with death intervening and achievements gained, but with history proceeding on nevertheless. Any talk of an ultimate meaning, an end-game to the world's ongoing story, would be a little meaningless to the average person. Such questions would not occur to them – the world is assumed to be a given process, and more or less without end. But Christ has told us what the end-game will be. The world as we know it will indeed come to an end, and that end will be marked by

the coming of Jesus Christ. We are reminded of this by our Lord's talk of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. It could not be imagined then, but it happened.

All these things you see, our Lord tells his disciples, this spectacular building that is at the heart of the nation's religious life, this treasure of the nation – it will all come to an end, and will then be in pieces. What our Lord says of the Temple we ought take as an omen of the ultimate course and fate of the world. Just as the Temple was reduced to rubble, with its successor being the Person of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and living as Head of his Church, so too the end will entail the passing away of this world and its replacement by a new heaven and a new earth. This present world will be transformed and will be made glorious. How important to gain a place in it! We have been told of the end, and so we ought take daily account of it. The end of each individual life and the end of the world is the coming of Christ to judge. There may or may not be many great moments in the life of any one individual, but one moment will be undeniably and

unavoidably great – it will be when Christ comes to judge him at the end, following his death. That moment will be great beyond measure. It will be the climax of all that has gone before, and will determine his eternal future. That moment, that event, is absolutely unavoidable. Buddha cannot avoid it, nor can Mahomet – both have met Christ as their Judge. Every single person on the face of the earth will have for his greatest moment his meeting with Christ at the end. So it will be for the world. There are many striking moments and phases in the history of the world, but at the end of history, all will be gathered before the Judge who will come in glory. He will separate the sheep from the goats, and then there will be heaven for the one, and hell for the other. This will be the climax of all moments for mankind and the world, when this our present scene will pass away. All will be made new, and whatever might have been the splendour of this present world in some of its elements, nothing will compare with the glory of the next. So each individual and all mankind together ought think of the end. There will be an end to the present scene, and that end will be a

new beginning, for good or for ill. The defining thing will be our attitude to Jesus Christ.

Just as it is the wise and prudent thing for each individual to live in the light of his coming judgment, so it is the wise thing for the world as a whole to ask, where is all of this ultimately heading? God has revealed the answer to this and it is that all is heading towards the final coming of Jesus Christ the King of kings and Lord of lords. Let the world prepare for it, then! All should be done in such a way that the coming Judgment will pass well. It will be the greatest of all moments, and will be the door to everlasting glory, or to the terrible abyss.



Wednesday of the Thirty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84): 9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 15: 1-4; Psalm 97; Luke 21:12-19

Jesus said, But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your

adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life. (Luke 21:12-19)

Suffering François Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan was born on 17 April 1928 in the imperial capital of Hué, Vietnam. In the years to come, his uncle Ngô Đình Diem became South Vietnam's first President, and another uncle was Archbishop Ngô Đình Thuc. In 1941, aged 13, Francois-Xavier entered An Ninh Minor Seminary and twelve years later was ordained a priest on June 11, 1953. So he was one of numerous priests who in some way heard the call to the priesthood as a boy, and whose path to the priesthood was direct. During these years of formation he must have impressed his superiors, for he was then sent to Rome for further studies, lasting six years. He then returned to serve as a faculty member and then rector of the Seminary of Nha Trang for the following eight years, as well as doing work as prison and hospital

chaplain. He was appointed Bishop of Nha Trang (the diocese of the Seminary) on 13 April 1967 and received episcopal consecration on 4 June 1967 at Hué, his native city. I have seen it stated that in his eight years as bishop there the seminarians in the diocese more than tripled in number. In any case, on 24 April 1975, he was appointed by Pope Paul VI as Coadjutor Archbishop of Saigon. Paul VI had an intense interest in the Vietnam war, and knew the situation well. His appointment of Nguyen Van Thuan to Saigon indicates the esteem in which François Xavier was held by the Pope himself. On 30 April, barely a week after his appointment, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese Army, and François Xavier, targeted for his faith as well as his family connection to Ngô Đình Diem, was imprisoned by the Communist Government of Vietnam for 13 years, 9 of them in solitary confinement. But he rose to the occasion, and continued to practise his faith and bear witness to Jesus, exemplifying by his life the words of Jesus Christ in our Gospel today. Finally released, for many years he was refused re-entry to his own country and received significant Vatican appointments. He, the well-known and saintly Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, highly esteemed

by Pope John Paul II, died in 2002. His Cause for Canonization opened in 2007. His spirit flowered amid persecution for his faith.

There are thousands of ways to God in Christ, and there are thousands of paths along which divine Providence leads those who determine on being Christ's disciples. While the paths may be very different, there is one thing in common to them all – *suffering*. John Henry Newman, the illustrious English convert of the nineteenth century, suffered unremittingly for decades from incessant hidden criticism, misunderstanding, calumny and gossip that quietly and at times loudly bore on him. He is now beatified, with canonization inevitable in due course. At times the persecution is even posthumous – such as that directed at Pope Pius XII, the Servant of God whose Cause for canonization is proceeding. Christ promises that the person who is truly his disciple will have much to suffer, and a good deal of the suffering will come from others. Even more telling is the fact that it is good men who will often be the source of that very suffering. Of course, the mere fact that a person is suffering does not indicate that he

is a disciple of Jesus Christ, but if he is a disciple of Christ, suffering will be part of his course. Suffering is meritorious if it is borne in the spirit of Christ. To such a one, Christ says that your sufferings will become a testimony. Such was the case of Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, and many other holy persons who could be cited. The word "martyr" is virtually a transliteration from the Greek, meaning a "witness." In the event, the many minor and several major reversals experienced by many holy persons become themselves the means of witnessing to Jesus – and all is in the hand of God. It could be said that the iconic example of this is the early Church which suffered nearly three centuries of intermittent persecution, often savage and devastating. But the witness of the Church shone through and the triumph came. Our Lord promises divine aid: *"make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict."* Suffering is now an opportunity.

Let us ponder the words of Jesus Christ on this aspect of discipleship and how bluntly our Lord predicts it. In hyperbolic fashion he drives his point home: "*All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish.*" Then comes the grand promise: "*By standing firm you will gain life*" (Luke 21: 12-19). Let us learn from the saints, so varied in their persons, in their histories, in the upshot of their lives, how we must expect something of this if we are to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. By your endurance you will gain life.



Thursday of the Thirty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84):9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 18:1-2.21-23;19: 1-3.9; Psalm 99;
 Luke 21:20-28

Jesus said, When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfilment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those

days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:20-28)

The End In our passage today our Lord speaks in a manner redolent of the Old Testament, predicting terrible calamities for the chosen people. He is obviously referring to the sack of Jerusalem by the Romans – Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles – but this event is also an omen of sufferings far beyond the fall of the City, "*until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.*" He speaks of cosmic

events – *"there will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken."* Our Lord speaks of it being *"the time of punishment in fulfilment of all that has been written,"* but it would seem to be more than that. It will also be a time of trial for the just who await redemption. The key to the prophecy is Christ's oft-repeated reference to himself as the "Son of Man." I am sure that chapter 7 of the Book of Daniel was among those prophetic passages of the Scriptures that were much loved by our Lord. It speaks of "one like a son of man" being given the everlasting kingdom. The chapter opens with the vision of the four beasts coming out of the great sea. Each beast was an ogre and different from the others. The horrifying threat is then eclipsed by the scene of the Ancient One on his throne, full of glory – with brightness, whiteness and fire. The books are opened and the beasts lose their dominion, but are granted a season more. Then "one like a son of man" comes on "the clouds of heaven" to the Ancient One, and receives an everlasting kingdom that will never be

destroyed. In our Gospel passage today, our Lord describes the terrible confusion and upheaval, and himself "coming in a cloud with power and great glory." His coming is a cause of rejoicing – just as in Daniel 7, where *"the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingship, to possess it forever and ever."* Our Lord at various times spoke of his disciples judging the tribes of Israel – which is to say, sharing in his kingship. In our passage, our Lord confirms the prophecy of Daniel, showing that he is the one being referred to.

In the Book of Daniel, the "one like a son of man" comes on "the clouds of heaven." That is to say, his status is unique, beyond compare. The "cloud" was an abode of God - in the Book of Exodus, *"the cloud covered the meeting tent, and the glory of the Lord filled the Dwelling. Moses could not enter the meeting tent, because the cloud settled down upon it and the glory of the Lord filled the Dwelling. Whenever the cloud rose from the Dwelling, the Israelites would set out on their journey"* (Exodus 40: 34-36). The presence of God, shown in the cloud, was their great consolation on their

journey. In one of the greatest miracles of the Gospels, the Transfiguration, a cloud overshadows them, and from the cloud is heard the voice of God. *"This is my beloved son: hear him!"* (Luke 9: 34-35). In our Gospel today (Luke 21:20-28), the "Son of Man," our Lord himself, will come "in a cloud with great power and glory." This will be a great consolation to Christ's faithful: *"When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."* All this is to say that our Lord is predicting many tribulations and the judgment of God, but that he himself is the King to whom we can look, whatever be the course of events in a world marked by good and evil, consolation and suffering. He is near, and he is coming. He will prevail and his kingdom will never end. It is a prediction of the End, which, whatever be our course in life and whatever be the experience of the nations and of the world, will be a coming to us of glory and happiness. This glory and happiness will be founded on Jesus Christ the King of kings and Lord of lords, the One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been granted. While on the one hand today's is a sombre prediction, it is, more than anything, a

prediction of hope. *"When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."* This applies to the macro-scene and to the micro-scene. It applies to the world in general, and it applies to each of us.

Let us accustom ourselves to looking on life and human history in terms of what, on the word of Jesus Christ, we know to be the End. We ought so live that, were the End to come suddenly, we could look forward to what is at the heart of that End, the coming of the Lord. We ought keep before our minds, that whatever be the tribulations of life, all is in the hands of the Ancient One and the Son of Man to whom has been given the everlasting kingdom. To him be the glory!



Friday of the Thirty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84):9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 20:1-4.11-21:2; Psalm 83;

Luke 21:29-33

Jesus told them this parable: Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have

happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (Luke 21: 29-33)

The Teacher Take the greatest of philosophers – say, the iconic philosophers for the West, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. However great their teaching in this or that respect – as in, say, the logic or ethics or metaphysics of Aristotle – none of them would claim *eternal authority*. None would have said, my words that you are noting down and recording have greater endurance than anything else in all the world. None these thinkers would have presumed to insist that in his words all persons have a much greater foundation for security than anything else. Such claims, they would have thought, would be preposterous. Or again, take the Hebrew prophets. They uttered the word of God, and the authority they claimed was based on their being transmitters of that word. They did not say, it is my word that you must rely upon, my word that is utterly reliable. They were simply messengers. It was the word of Another that they asked the people to obey. Or again, take Mahomet – founder of a religion that looked very

much to the Judaeo-Christian revelation, while departing from it in serious respects – he never said to his numerous followers, you must base your lives on my word. No, he saw himself purely as a Messenger, a prophet of Allah. He understood himself to be in the line of the prophets of historical revelation, and indeed as being the definitive prophet, but no more than a Messenger nevertheless. It was God's word that he understood himself to be proclaiming, not just his own. He was a reporter, and his great book, the *Koran*, is presented as and taken to be the word of Allah, delivered to him from heaven. There have been plenty of teachers who have, for very good reasons or for very bad ones, been very sure of the truth of what they have said. But I cannot think of any who have presumed to claim the personal authority that Jesus Christ claimed. "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away*" (Luke 21: 29-33). He possessed an unclouded awareness of his supreme authority. "*You have heard it said to those of old... But I say unto you!*" (Matt 5: 33).

When thinking of the supreme authority of this Man of the ages, who lived, nevertheless, at a particular time and in a particular place, our minds go to other authorities in the history of the world – not at all his equals, but authorities nevertheless. Let us imagine a scenario, simply as a device to help us form an attitude to those other, lesser authorities. Let us imagine Jesus Christ actually meeting such persons. In the Gospel of St John, not long before Christ's Passion, we read that "some Greeks" who were in Jerusalem for the Festival, said to Philip, "we would like to see Jesus" – and Philip brought them to him. Those "Greeks" were of the Hebrew faith, but let us imagine a different group of "Greeks," a pagan group that included, say, Aristotle, or Plato. Let us imagine an eminent Roman among them – say, Cicero. Let us imagine the conversation between them and Jesus – and I am sure our Lord was tri-lingual, speaking Greek and Latin, apart from Aramaic and probably Hebrew. He came from cosmopolitan Galilee, and conversed easily with Pilate when the time came. What would our Lord's attitude have been towards them? I believe it would have been one of genial, welcoming respect. They would have seen in

him a quintessential Hebrew, of the most profound religion and the highest intelligence. Our Lord would have instantly plumbed the state of their hearts, yet he would have spoken to them with courtesy and respect. For instance, he spoke courteously to Pilate. He spoke respectfully about Caesar: *Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's*, he told his enemies among the Jewish leaders. He accorded the highest praise to the Roman centurion who asked the favour of a cure for his servant. *No-where in Israel have I found faith like this*, he told the Jews. He told the Canaanite woman, *Great is your faith!* He would have been told by his mother of the veneration accorded him by the Zoroastrian wise men from the East in his early infancy. My point here is that our Lord, the greatest of teachers, would have accorded respect where it was due for teachers of merit, beyond the pale of the faith.

The Christian fully accepts the word of Jesus Christ as being the divine word because he is both man and God. Heaven and earth will pass away – as it were – but his word will never pass

away. Nevertheless, the Christian is always open to, and interested in, any other word of truth. Indeed, the Christian knows that the Spirit of Christ moves among the peoples, working to guide them to the truth, and preparing them for the reception of the word of the supreme Teacher, Jesus Christ. Let us be open and genial to all truth wherever it may be, knowing withal that we have the Blessing of union with the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.



Saturday of the Thirty-fourth Week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84): 9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 22:1-7; Psalm 94; Luke 21:34-36

Jesus said to his disciples, Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to

happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man. (Luke 21: 34-36)

Excellence Most people would understand that there is a difference between pleasure and happiness, between enjoyment and joy. One can gain pleasure from something – such as a favourite drink, a particular conversation, or a form of recreation – while lacking real happiness. In fact, a person can proceed through life seeking and gaining various pleasures, and never gaining real joy. At the same time, one can be *happy* while having very few *pleasures*. I think of the ordinary, unselfish wife and mother of very moderate means in life who is truly happy, while not far from her, there lives a person of great wealth who is unhappy. One can possess various enjoyments, while possessing little joy. Now, it is intriguing to notice that one of the sources of happiness in life is the attainment of excellence in one's chosen activity. It could almost be said that in a certain sense excellence gives both pleasure and happiness. The jockey spends years of training in a self-denying regime of work in order to excel in his horse-racing, and

he succeeds. He attains excellence in it, and it gives him real happiness – even though there have been few "pleasures" for him along the road to success in his chosen profession. A youth begins music lessons in piano or violin, and discovers in himself a liking and a propensity for his instrument. He spends years of study and practice and becomes excellent at it – and his excellence in music brings a level of joy to his life. Success in one's work through excellence in it is undoubtedly a source of human happiness, showing that we were born to work. We were made to work well, to do good work – the question being, then, what ought be our work in life? If we can discover what it is that we are drawn to do for our neighbour, and what our abilities suggest ought be our line of service, then a level of happiness will come if we serve with excellence in that chosen field. To serve our neighbour with the excellence that lies within our capacity, is a very important component of happiness in life. It is a question of degree, though. What gives most happiness?

The musician – Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, whoever – who attains excellence in his renditions and compositions will have served society well in his chosen field, and will have attained a level of happiness as a result. But of course, we know that there are excellent practitioners in this or that field who do have unhappy lives. Actors and actresses can commit suicide. They apply themselves to one field of "work" in life and attain excellence in it, but fail to do so in other – perhaps much more important – fields of "work" in life. A man senses that he is called to a life in politics and he devotes himself to it – but he neglects his family and perhaps his health too. He has neglected to work at one of the most important things of all in his life – his relationship with and service of his wife and children. This neglect and failure in excellence in something central to his life brings a greater unhappiness than the happiness which he has attained through his chosen work. Across the board, this pattern can apply – the musician, the artist, the medical professional, the teacher, the politician. It illustrates the point that while excellence in work brings a degree of happiness (and not just pleasure) in life, it is most important for

happiness that a man devote himself to the most important things in life. His greatest happiness will come if he attains excellence in the most important things. What is the most important thing in life, then? The most important thing in life is what our Lord alludes to when asked what is the greatest of the commandments. He said that the first was that we *love God with all our mind, heart and strength*. The second was like it, that we *love our neighbour as ourselves*. So the "work" that above all we ought be dedicating ourselves to in life is the love of God and neighbour. We ought work every day to attain *excellence in love*. Our most important work in life is to excel in the love of God and neighbour. If we attain excellence in this we shall be truly happy. This is why the saint is the truly happy person, even though he will have had to suffer much – as did Christ himself.

In our Gospel today (Luke 21:34-36) our Lord warns us against being weighed down by dissipation. We must not be distracted and led astray from the pursuit of excellence. At the same time our pursuit ought be in the right areas of excellence, for life could come to its end

suddenly. We must therefore be "always on the watch," making sure that our path in giving our best is the right path, the path God has indicated. *This is the will of God*, St Paul writes, *your sanctification*. We must aim at sanctity, at the love of God in everything we do. We ought aim at excellence in love, depending on the grace of God for its attainment. This excellence in the love of God and neighbour is what ought inform all our efforts to serve others in our daily work and career. The saint is the happiest person, the person of true joy. Let us aim at excellence in this sense.



Feasts,
Solemnities,
and Memorials

Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God (January 1)

Entrance Antiphon Hail, Holy Mother, who gave birth to the King,
who rules heaven and earth for ever.

Or:

Cf. Is 9: 1, 5; Lk 1: 33 Today a light will shine upon us, for the Lord
is born for us; and he will be called Wondrous God, Prince of peace,
Father of future ages: and his reign will be without end.

Collect O God, who through the fruitful virginity of Blessed Mary
bestowed on the human race the grace of eternal salvation, grant, we
pray, that we may experience the intercession of her, through whom we
were found worthy to receive the author of life, our Lord Jesus Christ,
your Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy
Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8;

Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:16-21

So the shepherds hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. (Luke 2:16-21)

Mother of God One of the features of the ancient world – the world of the time of Jesus – was that it was brimful of religions. From Egypt to Mesopotamia to Greece and to Rome itself, life swarmed with the tenets of religion. The imagination of the ancient world was deeply imprinted by religious myth. But out of Palestine suddenly came a religion that was being announced with urgency, with persistence and assurance. It allowed for no other religion as being true – though it did

allow for *seeds* of truth to be present in them. Its claim was that a man who had lived and had been executed there when Pilate was Procurator, was now alive. He was the long expected Messiah. Many had heard of this Jewish expectation of a great Messiah. Now many had identified him, and were spreading the word across the Empire. There was no disputing that he was an historical man: all knew this. He had been put to death by the civil authority (Tacitus in his *Annals* XV: 44 tells us that “Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius”). But what was being claimed was that he had come forth from the tomb alive, and that he is the only God. So was his heavenly Father! So was a mysterious third divine Person. These were not three more gods for the pantheon of the Roman world, but only one God – there were no others! It was an exclusive truth and was judged to be profoundly subversive of the religious fabric of the Empire, throbbing and heaving as it was in a cauldron of religions. The core of it all was that this man Jesus, this Messiah, was the one and only God. That, in essence, is precisely what the Christian celebrates during the season of Christmas. In the

beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the *Word was God*. At Christmas we celebrate that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and some saw his glory, the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. There have been numerous high gods in the religions of man, and there were high gods in the ancient world. Jupiter was the king of the gods for the Roman state. His counterpart in Greek religion was Zeus, in Etruscan religion, Tinia, and in Hindu mythology, Indra. But none of these high gods compared in height and power with Yahweh, the God of Jewish revelation. The Christians now had it that this one God was three Persons. The second of them became a man, and that he had sent his followers to convert the world.

One of the reasons why both Matthew and Luke stress the events of the conception, birth and infancy of Jesus Christ is to emphasize that the great God did truly become man. He did not just suddenly appear among men and walk with them as one does with friends. No, he was truly conceived, but miraculously of a

Virgin. Emphatically he was truly conceived. God began his human course as a child in the womb. His mother had a name, lived in a certain location and at a very particular time. How came she to be his mother, while being a virgin nevertheless? The explanation is provided. It was by a miraculous intervention of God that this Virgin, by the power of the Holy Spirit, truly conceived this divine Child. From her he derived his humanity while remaining the God he had been for all eternity. A divine Person, he now assumed a human nature as well. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin gave to the Word, as would a mother to her offspring – but without any human father – the human nature he assumed to his divine Person. In one miraculous moment she gave and he received. Thus there began in the womb of the virgin the earthly course of God made man. Mary was not the mere receptacle of the second divine Person become man, the eternal Word become flesh. The incarnate Son of God now had a human mother. By the power of God he drew from her his manhood and her DNA passed to him. He was conceived, nourished in the womb, born in a stable at Bethlehem, cared for as an infant, grew in

nature and grace as a youth, fulfilled all that was good and due as a young man, and was manifested to the world. The world had a brother and a Saviour beyond all possible expectation. He began his course with a mother and he ended his course with a mother. While on the cross he gave this mother to all his beloved disciples, and this same mother will be his and ours for all eternity. Thus it is that at the beginning of the year we think of Mary the mother of God, God the Son made man. The Incarnation is no myth, but a cold, hard and sober fact. It is part of real history, and the divine motherhood of the Virgin Mary attests to the historical truth of the Incarnation.

Let every Christian think of the greatness of Christ's mother. All generations will call me blessed, she said to her kinswoman Elizabeth. Blessed are you among women, Elizabeth had said to her. The Almighty has looked upon his lowly servant, Mary said. She is the mother of Jesus Christ, and therefore is the mother of God the Son made man. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death!

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.964-970

(Mary's Motherhood with regard to the Church)



Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, Apostle (Jan 25)

Entrance Antiphon 2 Tm 1:12; 4: 8 I know the one in whom I have believed and I am sure that he, the just judge, the mighty, will keep safe what is my due until that day.

Collect O God, who taught the whole world through the preaching of the blessed Apostle Paul, draw us, we pray, nearer to you through the example of him whose conversion we celebrate today, and so make us witnesses to your truth in the world. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Conversion of St Paul (January 25) Paul's entire life can be explained in terms of one experience — his meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Perhaps he had never seen Jesus, who was only a

few years older. But he had acquired a zealot's hatred of all Jesus stood for, as he began to harass the Church: "... entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment" (Acts 8:3b). Now he himself was a slave of Christ in the ministry of reconciliation, an instrument to help others experience the one Saviour. One sentence determined his theology: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5b). Jesus was mysteriously identified with his Church. From then on, his only work was to "present everyone perfect in Christ. For this I labour and struggle, in accord with the exercise of his power working within me" (Colossians 1:28b-29). "For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and [with] much conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5a).

Scripture today: Acts 22:3-16 or Acts 9:1-22; Psalm 117:1bc, 2;

Mark 16:15-18

Jesus said to them, Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will

accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well. (Mark 16:15-18)

St Paul I once attended an address given by an Archbishop who was a well-qualified Scripture scholar with a Doctorate in Sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. His own speciality in Scripture had been, I think, the Gospel of St Luke, and he made the (tongue-in-cheek) observation that when he was eventually asked to teach the Letters of St Paul he discovered that he did not much like St Paul. He was joking, but I think he was saying that the image of St Paul that we can so easily have is of a person who was driven by his sense of mission and not notable for his humanity. But he quickly realized — as we all do — that St Paul had a tremendous heart. It is his *love* for people which is especially striking in his Letters. *Love* urged him along in his missionary life, a love which reflected the love of

Christ. Moreover, when we think of St Paul, there is this to be remembered. I mentioned the Gospel of St Luke. St Luke's writings (his Gospel and the Acts) occupy more space in the New Testament than any other author, closely followed by the writings of St Paul (if we allow that Hebrews did not have Paul for its author). Paul's experience of Christ was of him as risen from the dead. He did not know him personally during his earthly sojourn. But he had Luke the historian for his friend and assistant in some of his missionary journeys. Luke carefully gathered and compiled much historical information about the birth and infancy of Christ, about Mary and Joseph, about Christ's years in Nazareth, his public ministry, his Passion and Death, and also the early history of parts of the infant Church. This material was becoming his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, and in his research he was guided by the Holy Spirit. I like to think of St Paul being filled with the facts of our Lord's life and death by what his friend was compiling so successfully. On the feast of the conversion of St Paul when we think of his first encounter with Christ, let us also think of how he might have gained knowledge of many of the historical facts about the earthly life

of Jesus — by Luke, author of the Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles.

Today we think of the occasion which began the story of the Apostle Paul. Paul had been, as we all know from the Acts of the Apostles and from the Letters of St Paul, a ruthless persecutor of the early disciples. There were other persecutors at the same time and before him. There had been persecutors at the time of our Lord himself, and some had succeeded in putting our Lord to death — but all under the Providence of God. Now, what became of these persecutors? They disappeared into the mists of history. They had been kicking against the goad, and to no ultimate effect. Now, for all Paul's energy, he too would probably have disappeared into the obscurity of history, unknown to us if he had proceeded along that course. But that course of Paul's changed and it was due to the intervention of Jesus Christ. Paul was, we might say, in full flight and he was suddenly brought to the ground. There, like a bird shot in the wing, he struggled and limped along. He was blinded and the risen Jesus spoke to

him. From that point everything changed. Paul was converted from implacable opposition to Christ to an unyielding love for him. It shows two things. Firstly, it shows the power of God's grace. We ought never give up on what God can do. Time and again in the history of the Church there have been massive threats, but prayer and resolve have turned the tide. Even military battles have been won due the power of prayer — let us think of, say, the battle of Lepanto in 1571. Paul himself always looked on his own conversion as a signal sign of the power and the mercy of God. God can overcome sin and blindness. At the same time, as our Lord pointed out in his parable of the Sower going out to sow, there has to be good soil to receive the seed. For all his ferocity against the Church, Paul was acting sincerely according to his lights. That is to say, he was acting in accord with his conscience. Fundamentally he was striving to obey God. When the true light entered his life, he changed his course and followed that light. The Conversion of St Paul shows the power of God's grace and the importance of fidelity to our sense of duty, even if it be temporarily mistaken.

Every day we ought begin anew in our love and service of Jesus Christ. Each of us has a mission in life, even if it appears modest indeed. Each of us has a place in the providence of God. Let us then do our best to fulfil the work that has been given to us. It will be our way of showing our love for God and for Christ, and of doing all we can to fulfil the saving work of God. Let us take St Paul for our example, and make the love of Christ the defining element in our daily life.



Feast of the Presentation of the Lord (February 2)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47): 10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, we humbly implore your majesty that, just as your Only Begotten Son was presented on this day in the Temple in the substance of our flesh, so, by your grace, we may be presented to you with minds made pure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Presentation At the end of the fourth century, a woman named Etheria made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Her journal, discovered in 1887, gives an unprecedented glimpse of liturgical life there. Among the celebrations she describes is the Epiphany (January 6), the observance of Christ's birth, and the gala procession in honour of his

Presentation in the Temple 40 days later-February 15. This feast emphasizes Jesus' first appearance in the Temple more than Mary's purification. The observance spread throughout the Western Church in the fifth and sixth centuries. Because the Church in the West celebrated Jesus' birth on December 25, the Presentation was moved to February 2, or 40 days after Christmas. At the beginning of the eighth century, Pope Sergius inaugurated a candlelight procession; at the end of the same century the blessing and distribution of candles which continues to this day became part of the celebration, giving to it its popular name: Candlemas.

Scripture today: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24:7-10;

Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40 or 2:22-32

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: a pair of doves or two young

pigeons. Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2:22-32)

The Presentation of Christ

There are many obvious reasons for striving to overcome illiteracy. Among those reasons is that by being literate a person has the benefit of being able to read not only practical everyday material, but excellent material which can enrich his cultural life. If this is so, then a principal benefit of being literate is that one is able thereby to read the inspired Scriptures. For the ordinary secular

man, this benefit is scarcely notable. But for the person who knows that the Bible is the Book of books and that God is its Author, not to be able to read the Bible would constitute a serious lacuna in a person's life. I say this as an introduction to some thoughts on the immense importance of Bible reading. Kierkegaard urged that a person read the Bible as one would read a letter from a personal friend. Of course, it is an altogether special Letter – it is in fact a collection of short “books” (scrolls) of various genres, written over different centuries and containing varied material. Though all these books have God as their fundamental author, they certainly vary in importance. I would like to suggest that our Gospel scene today throws light on the Scriptures and how we ought approach them. To begin with, let us observe that in this Gospel scene we have surely the grandest gathering of those who embodied the purest and highest elements of the Old and New Testaments. It presents Simeon and Anna representing so beautifully the Old Testament, Mary and Joseph as the bridge with the New, and the infant Messiah as the fullness of the promised blessing. In that singular group there is represented all of God's dealings with his chosen people and all of the

Scriptures which record those dealings. Perhaps few outside the little group noticed the gathering, yet that group of five represented all that the Holy Spirit had done up until the coming of Christ, and was a pointer to the salvation to come. The infant Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, was being brought to the Lord God in the Temple. The aura of Christmas over, Calvary appears in the distance.

To begin with, the thought of this group at Christ's presentation in the temple ought inspire in us a profound love for the Old Testament, for we see in this group its products. Simeon and Anna were two of its saints, and beautiful souls they were! They lived holy lives, fulfilling their daily duty scrupulously and with love. They were led by the Spirit of God and longed with love for the Messiah. They were given the grace of seeing him and rejoiced. They embodied the spirit of the Old Testament, and I would suggest that if we wish for a key to the interpretation of the Old Testament, we have one in the image of these two souls. What they were, and what they did, tell us what the Old Testament is and what it is for. It points to the coming of the Messiah,

and its various parts are to be read with the thought of the Messiah in mind. The climax of the lives of both Simeon and Anna was the presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple. The climax of the Old Testament was the coming of the Saviour, and Simeon and Anna point to Jesus as that Saviour. The thought of Simeon and Anna ought convey to us a deep love for the Old Testament and an insight into how it is to be read. This scene of the Presentation of the Lord also shows the deep *connection* between the Old and the New. The Old and the New meet in this scene, and there is displayed a deep harmony and union between the two. The same Holy Spirit who led Simeon and Anna was the same divine Spirit who formed Mary and Joseph and who brought about the Incarnation. At the same time, our Gospel scene shows us that the most *important* part of the Scriptures is the simplest part, the part that is most accessible to the ordinary reader: namely, the *Gospels*. The four Gospels are the heart of the Bible, and are the part that all ought to read most often for they reveal the One who is being presented here in the Temple. Christ is the key, the summit and the focus of the Old Testament, and the Old Testament helps us appreciate

the resounding message of the New. That message is that Christ is the salvation of the nations, the light of the pagans, the deliverer of Jerusalem, and the glory of Israel.

Let us linger in this Gospel scene of Christ's presentation in the Temple. It is full of significance, and, as I have said, it also tells us much about the meaning and structure of the Bible itself. It illustrates the grandeur of the Old Testament; it shows forth the centrality of the New; it reminds us of the unity and harmony of both, and it sets forth the Gospel story of Jesus as the high point and key to all of the Scriptures. St Jerome once wrote that ignorance of the Scriptures will mean ignorance of Christ. So let us love the inspired Scriptures, and most especially the Gospels.



Feast of the Chair of St Peter (February 22)

Entrance Antiphon Lk 22:32 The Lord says to Simon Peter: I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and, once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that no tempests may disturb us, for you have set us fast on the rock of the Apostle Peter's confession of faith. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Chair of Peter (February 22) Like the committee chair, this feast refers to the occupant. It commemorates Christ's choosing Peter to sit in his place as the servant authority of the whole Church (see June 29). At the end of John's Gospel, Jesus says to Peter, "Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18). What Jesus said indicated the sort of death

by which Peter was to glorify God. On Vatican Hill, in Rome, during the reign of Nero, Peter did glorify his Lord with a martyr's death, probably in the company of many Christians. Second century Christians built a small memorial over his burial spot. In the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine built a basilica, which was replaced in the 16th century.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 5:1-4; Psalm 23:1-6; Matthew 16:13-19

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, Who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in

heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16: 13-19)

The Chair of Peter I have often been impressed with the simplicity of the Christian message as expressed in non-Catholic Christian leaflets left in letterboxes of suburban homes. The short leaflets are often made of glossy paper, with attractive diagrams and colouring, and are expressed in simple, pithy language. The principal *doctrines* of the Christian religion are expressed as part of a compelling *system*. There is sin and its consequences, and this dire situation is answered by the Atonement of Jesus Christ and the gift of his Holy Spirit. Then there is the call to conversion and a new life, setting the Christian on the way to Heaven. The strength of the message is the call to the individual to turn to Jesus Christ as Saviour and to resolve to follow him and his written word in one's personal life, and of course to do this in some form of fellowship. The leaflets I am thinking of are the productions of certain groupings of Christians, and their dedication and strategy are laudable. There is, though, an assumption in their message which may

not be immediately obvious. In urging the reader (or hearer) to turn to Jesus and to accept him as Lord, it is intimated that being a Christian is *simply* an affair between Jesus and the Christian. That is to say, in the plan of God the Christian religion is *nothing other* than this living interpersonal relationship between *Jesus and me*. More specifically, provided I convert and follow Jesus and his word as I read it in the inspired Scriptures, I may take "the Church" to be largely a product of individual judgment and circumstances. That is to say, while the Church is important for fellowship and ongoing spiritual guidance, there is nothing divinely-intended about its structure and formal mission. What matters is my acceptance of Jesus as Lord and my fidelity to his word in the Scriptures as I sincerely judge it to be. Jesus my Saviour is what matters, and if need be "the Church" may fall by the wayside. Such is the common assumption of many Christians, but an open-minded perusal of the Gospel shows that this does not represent the full Christian message, but a mere part of it. Indeed, it lacks an essential component.

In our Gospel today (Matthew 16:13-19) our Lord turns to his disciples and asks what men say of him. Various answers were given and we can easily imagine the various answers that would have to be given were the same question be put by Christ to his disciples today. But then our Lord asks his own disciples what *they* think of him. "But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." We may say that the reply of Simon Peter to Christ's question is the very same as that given in the succinct and effective Christian leaflets that I mentioned earlier. Jesus Christ is the Messiah who saves – and specifically, he saves the world from its *sin*. He is the Christ, and he is the Son of the Living God. This is the essential belief of any Christian. Were a person to call himself a Christian but not believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah who has taken away the sin of the world, and that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, then that person would be using the word "Christian" falsely. But this is not all there is to the Christian message, for our Lord does not rest content with praising Simon Peter highly for his answer and assuring him that his faith has

come from God. He does not *merely* say, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." No, for he immediately *goes on* to reveal what is clearly necessary for his redemptive work, and what will be the divinely appointed channel for bringing the blessings of the Kingdom of God to men. He tells Simon in the presence of the Apostles that "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16: 13-19). The Church is Christ's own deliberate creation. It is founded on Simon who has a title, the Rock. Simon holds the keys to the Kingdom of heaven, and he has the authority to bind and loose, and his decisions will be ratified in heaven. The *Church* founded on Simon matters greatly in the plan of God.

The Church is Christ's creation, as is the Chair of Simon Peter. Just as the Church Christ founded continues through history as

his body, so does the Chair of St Peter continue through history. That Chair holds the keys, and with those keys are the doors to the Kingdom unlocked for men. That Chair, occupied by the successors of St Peter, has authority from heaven to bind and to loose, and its decisions carry divine sanctions. Christ will be with that Chair till the end when he comes, and the gates of Hell will never prevail against it. Let us love and revere this Chair, this office that bears witness to the teaching and Person of Christ. By means of it we live in the truth.



Feast of Saint Patrick (March 17)

Entrance Antiphon Proclaim the salvation of God day by day; tell among the nations his glory. (Psalm 95:2-4)

Collect O God, who chose the Bishop Saint Patrick to preach your glory to the peoples of Ireland, grant, through his merits and intercession, that those who glory in the name of Christian may never cease to proclaim your wondrous deeds to all. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St. Patrick (415? - 493?) (March 17) Patrick may have been born in Dunbarton, Scotland, Cumberland, England, or in northern Wales. He called himself both a Roman and a Briton. At 16, he and a large number of his father's slaves and vassals were captured by Irish raiders and sold as slaves in Ireland. Forced to work as a shepherd, he suffered greatly from hunger and cold. After six years, Patrick escaped, probably to France, and later returned to Britain at the age of 22. His

captivity had meant spiritual conversion. He may have studied at Lerins, off the French coast; he spent years at Auxerre, France, and was consecrated bishop at the age of 43. In a relatively short time the island had experienced deeply the Christian spirit, and was prepared to send out missionaries whose efforts were greatly responsible for Christianizing Europe. One of the few certainly authentic writings is his Confessio, above all an act of homage to God for having called Patrick, unworthy sinner, to the apostolate. His burial place is said to be in Ulster, in County Down.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 1:4-9; Acts 13:46-49; Luke 10:1-12

After this the Lord appointed seventy two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is

there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.' But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.' I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. (Luke 10: 1-12)

Apostolic Friendship In Nazareth there are, of course, well-known Christian churches that honour the Incarnation. There is the large Catholic basilica of the Annunciation with its House of Mary underneath, commemorating the conception of Christ in the womb of the Virgin Mary. There is impressive archaeological work associated with that church. There is the associated church of St Joseph, commemorating the dwelling of the Holy Family. There is also the

Greek Orthodox church of what is called the Spring of Mary, commemorating the spring where Mary would have come to draw water. The Greek Orthodox take the Annunciation to have occurred while Mary was at that spring of water. In the same large city of Nazareth – now grown far beyond its size at the time of Christ – there are mosques, and in particular the White Mosque. I have visited that famous mosque and I could not but be impressed by the religious practice of the Moslems attending it. The menfolk entered, prayed and left in a reverent manner. I was instinctively led to compare in my own mind the two religions that are represented so strikingly in the city of Christ's childhood, youth and manhood. Islam honours the one and only God as it conceives and imagines him. Allah is high, transcendent, holy, merciful. Above all, Allah is very high and very great – he is the Master of all. He is a strong counterweight against the polytheism of the religions of man. There is no other God but he, and Islam characteristically interprets the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity as denying the oneness of Allah. How different is the Christian religion! Of course the Christian rejoices that Islam has profited so directly by

the absolute monotheism of the Judaeo-Christian revelation. But the God of Abraham, Moses and the prophets draws very near to his chosen people, speaking of himself as a *Husband* to the people of his choice. This nearness is surpassed and brought to its ultimate term in Jesus Christ. God has actually become man. God the Son, truly God and truly man, trod a chosen land and associated freely and easily with us his *brothers*. In speaking familiarly with him, people were speaking familiarly with the great God himself. The all-high God made himself wondrously near to us. In Jesus Christ, God became our brother and our friend.

Yes, for the one who by divine grace has discerned the divinity of Jesus Christ - for his humanity is evident – and who by baptism is in Christ, God the Son is his brother. Further, for that same person who by baptism is in Jesus Christ, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is his *Father* – and all this by the power of the Holy Spirit. God has crossed the distance and become our best of friends. For Islam, this is no way to speak of God. It is impertinent, for the one God is our exalted

Master and Lord. The pivotal element in the Christian religion is personal friendship with Jesus Christ, living, risen, unseen. By means of friendship with Jesus, established by the Sacraments and nourished by his word and personal prayer, we live in God who is our brother and our father. But there is a distinctive character to this friendship with Jesus Christ – and this brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 10: 1-12). Friendship with Jesus is not just a matter of being *with* Jesus in, we might even say, a sedentary sense. We are not, as Christians, simply sitting in a room with Jesus for the whole of our Christian life. By that I mean that our grasp of the outstretched hand of Jesus our Saviour does not end there. Yes, he extends his hand to us to take away our sins and to share his divine life with us. But very importantly, he also wishes to draw us into his *mission*. As our brother and our friend he wants us to join with him in his work. Just as God calls man (his creature) to collaborate with him in developing creation, so his Son Jesus Christ wants his disciples to help bring him and his redeeming grace to the world. He wants us to bear fruit, fruit that will last. Life for the Christian is life in union with our divine brother, saviour and friend, a

life that is very much a "working" life. It is a life of immersion in the work of Jesus Christ our brother. We are all called to collaborate with Christ in bringing salvation in him to the world. And so it is that we read in our Gospel today that our Lord *"appointed seventy two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go!* We must work and pray for it.

For this reason many decades ago the Venerable Pope Pius XII taught that an essential element of the Christian life is that it be apostolic. This teaching was repeated with insistence by the Second Vatican Council and developed by subsequent popes. No matter what our calling in life, if we aspire to friendship with the living Jesus – and sanctity consists of this – we must aspire to be one with Jesus in his mission. This is part and parcel of putting on the mind of Christ, as St Paul chooses to express it. Today is the feast of St Patrick, outstanding missionary. Christ calls us to an apostolic friendship with him, and the

character and shape of this will vary from calling to calling and circumstance to circumstance. Let us then strive to grow in the desire to bring others to Jesus Christ, for he is the life of man.



Solemnity of St Joseph the Husband of Mary (March 19)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Lk 12:42 Behold, a faithful and prudent steward, whom the Lord set over his household.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that by Saint Joseph's intercession your Church may constantly watch over the unfolding of the mysteries of human salvation, whose beginnings you entrusted to his faithful care. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Joseph (March 19) is considered the second greatest saint, next to the Blessed Virgin Mary, because of his humility and closeness to Jesus as the foster father of our Lord. Scripture tells us that Joseph was just, pure, gentle, prudent, and unfailingly obedient to the divine will. He died in the presence of Jesus and Mary. We wish to imitate him by renewing our desire to be faithful. We know that the only meaning of our life is to be faithful to the Lord till the last day as Joseph

was. Blessed Pius IX named him Patron of the Universal Church and Blessed John XXIII included his name in the Roman Canon.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 7:4 5a, 12 14a, 16; Psalm 89:2 5, 27, 29;

Romans 4:13, 16 18, 22; Matthew 1:16, 18 21, 24a or Luke 2:41-51a

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ. Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had

commanded him and took his wife into his home. (Matthew 1:16, 18 21, 24a)

Grandeur in Ordinary Life In ordinary life we tend to think that the little person does not matter much. Some historians maintain that the importance of the common people in shaping history is generally missed. I would propose that this is especially so in the case of those of the common people who are of great moral stature. At the time of her death, Therese of Lisieux in France was unknown beyond her convent. She lived during the last decades of the nineteenth century and was a great, yet quite hidden saint in her convent. Were it not for the publication of her autobiography, it is a moot point whether she would have been known, and canonized, and eventually (because of the doctrine contained in her autobiography and letters) declared a Doctor of the Church. Again, were it not for the subsequent fame of Therese as a saint, her parents would have been unknown. But her parents (Louis Martin and Marie Zélie Guérin) were hidden saints too, and were beatified in 2008 and canonized in 2015. We cannot speak adequately

of the extent to which the world depends on those of the common people who are truly good and holy, but as a factor in history I tend to think that it is vastly underestimated. Now, there is one instance of the ordinary, obscure person where history was profoundly affected. The Christian knows that the fundamental issue for mankind is the overcoming of sin and the attainment of goodness – goals which because of the Fall are absolutely beyond man's native powers. For this reason the greatest thing that has every happened in human history is the Incarnation. God became man to take away the sin of the world and to reconcile us to God. The Word was made flesh. Now, the Incarnation happened when the obscure, unknown virgin Mary gave her consent to the Angel. Much depended, too, on the subsequent decision of an equally unknown individual, Joseph. At the word from the angel, he received Mary as his wife. He became her husband, and the foster-father of the Messiah. If there is any case of the paramount importance of obscure and common persons, it is the case of Mary and Joseph.

Today we think of Joseph the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Joseph was the husband of the mother of God, and the foster-father of God the Son made man. In terms of objective importance, the Roman Emperor of the day (Augustus and then Tiberius) paled before Joseph, the one who was guardian of the Messiah. But beyond his tiny village, scarcely anyone would have known him. He was, it could easily be said, a nobody – a true representative of the common man. He spent his life as a humble carpenter, profoundly devout, an inhabitant of a tiny village which was satellite to the city of Zephoris. Of that village Nathanael asked: Can anything good come out of Nazareth? No words of his are recorded in the Gospels. Except for some moments of drama recorded in the Gospels, his life followed the common round characteristic of the millions of artisans like him. What did he do that was so important? *He did God's will* – and by contrast, one wonders whether there was very much in the lives of Augustus and Tiberius that was ever done according to God's will. Joseph always did exactly what God asked of him. He was a very great, yet hidden saint. Now, what was

the secret to his high sanctity? It was his continual intimacy with Jesus and Mary. He lived continually in their presence, serving, protecting and guiding them. It is a breathtaking thought that Joseph lived day after day, year after year, with the Son of God and with his all-holy Mother. He was the husband of the Mother of God, with all the love that this entailed. We can scarcely imagine the loftiness of the holy love that existed between them. How great a man, how great a husband was Joseph! But then, imagine being the foster-father of God the Son made man, knowing and loving and serving him so continually! Imagine the bond between the two, forged day after day in their work and home life. With the exception of the love between the Mother and her divine Son, there has been nothing to equal it on the face of the earth. How could any saint attain the relationship with Jesus that Joseph had, with the exception of Mary, Jesus' own mother? By decree of Pope Francis in 2013, he is now included in each Eucharistic Prayer at Mass.

How grand was the ordinary life of Joseph. If we want to gain a sense of the grandeur of ordinary life and the importance of the common person who fulfils his vocation to be good and holy, think of Joseph. No matter how ordinary our life may seem and how lacking in achievements and recognition, let us take inspiration from the person of St Joseph, husband of Mary. Let us ask him to make our life like his, a life fulfilling God's will (whatever it be and however humble) in the intimate presence of Jesus and Mary. *Go to Joseph!*, many saints have urged. How could God refuse the intercession of the husband of Mary and the foster-father of his Son?



Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord (March 25)

Entrance Antiphon Heb 10:5, 7 The Lord said, as he entered the world: Behold, I come to do your will, O God.

Collect O God, who willed that your Word should take on the reality of human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, grant, we pray, that we, who confess our Redeemer to be God and man, may merit to become partakers even in his divine nature. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

(March 25) The Annunciation was the moment when St. Gabriel the Archangel told Mary she would be the Mother of the Son of God. Mary, also a daughter of God, gave her "Fiat" (Be it done), by which she conceived the Saviour by the working of the Holy Spirit. Christians can always find meaning in this dialogue in which our Lady appears to us so humble yet so great. Through her consent to God's plans, she took part in the whole redemptive work of her Son, Jesus. We venerate her as the Mother of Christ and our Mother.

Scripture today: Isaiah 7: 10-14. 8:10; Psalm 39;
 Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Hail, you who are full of grace! The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end. How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin? The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to

be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May it be to me as you have said. Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Son and Mother In this pivotal event of the Gospel of St Luke, there are two protagonists whom the angel Gabriel sets forth for our contemplation. We are first drawn to consider "the virgin whose name was Mary." It is to be noted that in the Scriptures no emissary from heaven had ever addressed a person with such honour and praise. For instance, this same chapter of St Luke opens with a description of Elizabeth and Zachary. They "*were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord*" (1:6). They were excellent children of Israel. Notice how the angel Gabriel addresses Zachary. He exhorts him not to fear, and promises a child. The tone of the angel is one of command, and there is no special praise for his faithful life. But when the angel speaks to Mary, he begins with fulsome respect for her life of grace and union with God. "*You who are full of grace,*" he entitles her. "*The Lord is with*

you.” These are absolute statements and do not have qualifications. In this, Mary stands out within the entire sweep of the Scriptures both Old and New. The Church teaches that, as one full of grace she herself had been *conceived* immaculate. She was preserved free from original sin from the first instant of her conception, thanks to the grace of God and in anticipation of the merits of Jesus Christ. Full of grace, she was kept free from every personal sin her whole life long. She is declared by the angel to have found favour with God, and by divine choice is intended by Him to be mother of the promised Messiah, whose prerogatives will be even greater than those predicted. Having clarified her position and what God intended for her, she consented. "Be it done to me according to your word." She then conceived the eternal Son in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit without the cooperation of man. She is truly the Mother of God because she is truly the Mother of Christ. He who is her Son is the eternal Son of the Father. She is the absolutely obedient servant of God. So it is that through the ages the Church has maintained this praise of her that was begun by the angel.

So we, disciples of Christ, also sing, "*Hail Mary! Full of grace. The Lord is with you!*" But of course, Mary's greatness before God reflects, and is due to, her Son. And so the angel proceeds to announce to the holy maid the wonder of her future Son. In hearing his words, we bow down in spirit before the divine Person about to be made flesh in the womb of the holy virgin. We contemplate him in spirit as we hear the sonorous words from heaven describing him who is soon to come. He is the Son of the Most High, the Son of God. He is the Messiah, and eternally so: "*The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.*" Mary's son will be the Christ and the Son of the living God, no less. Further, the angel speaks to Mary of *the Most High*, of *the Son* of the Most High, and of *the Holy Spirit* who will bring about the Incarnation. So we have in the words of the angel an annunciation – as far as it went – of the mystery of the Incarnation and the mystery of the Holy Trinity. It was the first proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and it was received totally and in absolute obedience. The Son of God became incarnate in order to reconcile us

sinners with God, to have us learn of God's infinite love, to be our model of holiness and to make us partakers of the divine nature. All these blessings have their foundation in the Incarnation, in the wonderful union of the divine and human natures in the one divine Person of the Word. The Word who was with God in the beginning became flesh and dwelt among us. His glory was seen. In seeing, hearing and touching the man Jesus Christ, men made direct physical contact with God. Faith in the Incarnation is a distinctive sign of the Christian faith, and the refusal to believe this is the distinctive sign of the non-Christian. The son of Mary is true God and true man in the unity of his divine Person, our God and our brother. He saved us from our sins by his death and resurrection, and he abides constantly with us in his body, the Church.

The feast of the Annunciation is a central Solemnity in the Church's Liturgical Year. On this day we think of the words of the angel to and about the Virgin Mary, and about her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our one and only Redeemer. In seeing him, we

see the Father, for he is the image of the unseen God. He is the only way to the Father, and the only name by which men may be saved. By his side stands his sinless Mother who has been given to us by him as our mother in the order of grace. She is our mother and our model in the Christian life. She is the help of Christians enabling us to follow with love and devotion in the footsteps of her Son.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.456-503

(Why Did The Word Become Flesh?)



Feast of St Mark the Evangelist (April 26 in Australia,

April 25 elsewhere)

Entrance Antiphon Mk 16: 15 Go into all the world, and proclaim the Gospel to every creature, alleluia.

Collect O God, who raised up Saint Mark, your Evangelist, and endowed him with the grace to preach the Gospel, grant, we pray, that we may so profit from his teaching as to follow faithfully in the footsteps of Christ. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St. Mark (April 26) He was the son of a woman called Mary in whose house Peter sought refuge after being freed from jail. He aided St. Paul and his own cousin St. Barnabas in the evangelization of Cyprus. Later, Mark became the companion and secretary of St. Peter in Rome. He wrote the second Gospel, which emphasizes the miraculous powers of the Saviour.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 5:5-14; Psalm 88; Mark 16:15-20

Jesus said to [the Eleven] Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well. After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:15-20)

The Great One There were persons of ancient times who gained the title of "great." One thinks, perhaps, of Darius the Great (550-486 BC), or more obviously, of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.). Most would regard Alexander as the greatest military general of all time, setting out to conquer the entire civilized world that he knew – which in the main was the Persian Empire and some areas to its east. He brought

fire, sword and death wherever his troops arrived, and one might be justified in thinking that were he to have lived in the modern world, he might have been tried for crimes against humanity. In his moral life he was scarcely admirable, and the one mention that he is given in the Old Testament condemns him for his pride. He was great in his impact and influence, and had he lived long enough, one wonders what could have stopped him from conquering as much of the world as he pleased. It seems he had aspirations of attacking Carthage to the West, and had he been granted a long rather than a brief life he might have set his sights on the fledgling but rising Rome. In Alexander we have a “great” who set out to conquer the world as he knew it, and who allowed life to those who accepted his ambitions, and brought death to those who opposed them. Another who gained the title of “great” was the despicable Herod. Well now, as we think of those who attained the title of “great,” let us think of the unnoticed event on the outskirts of the Roman Empire nearly three centuries after Alexander. An angel was sent to a virgin named Mary, and announced to her that her son would be “great.” He would be great, and would be called the Son of the Most

High. In our Gospel today, this great One, great without qualification because he was not only human but divine, sends his disciples out to conquer the world. He sends them out on a mission much grander than that which drove Alexander, Julius Caesar or any of those who sought to conquer those parts of the world that mattered. He sends them out to the whole world (*eis ton kosmon apanta*), to preach to every creature (*pas ' t' ktisei*) (Mark 16:15).

In fact, we have here One who is superior to all the "greats" of this world. Barely three years before our Gospel scene of today, this same Person had not been known publicly. He was spending forty days in the wilderness preparing for his mission to extend God's Kingdom in his own Person to the world. There in the desert he was encountered by the dark and sinister Prince, whom at the Last Supper Christ would refer to as the Prince of this world. That Prince said to him in the wilderness that, if he would but worship him, he would hand over to him all the kingdoms of the world – for it was in his power to grant them to whomsoever he pleased. It was a flourish of boast and bravado,

but there was enough truth in it to prevent it from being ridiculous. One wonders to what extent Satan has had a hand in the conquests of those who have gained the title of great. Satan recognized that, whatever about Darius, Alexander and many others, here was One who was great without qualification. He aimed to conquer the world, and perhaps Satan could divine that he had it in him to do just that – but the problem for Satan was that this Man before him was a man of God. Jesus absolutely rejected Satan, and by his death and resurrection went on to take away the sin of the world. Now, as risen from the dead, he was in glory, and was set to embark on his world-wide conquest, a campaign to last to the end of the world when he would hand all back to his Father. To him had been granted all authority in heaven and on earth. He was Lord of lords and King of kings, and, risen from the dead, was setting out to conquer. Those who accepted him – who believed – would be saved. Those who refused him – who knowingly refused the light of faith – would be condemned. These were the ultimate alternatives. A victory march had begun, and the great weapon of the coming conquest was a share in the Cross of the King. The

sword and helmet of victory was a love for Christ that was humble, self-denying, and obedient to the will of the Father. Glory was coming, but the path to this glory was obedient suffering in imitation of the Master.

We are told that *"After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it"* (Mark 16: 15-20). We ourselves, two millennia later, have the same Lord of lords near and with us. He speaks the same words in our hearts. He is present in his body the Church, and he asks us to give our hearts to him and to make our lives an instrument of his work of conquest. He is the King and the Lord!



Feast of Saints Philip and James, Apostles (May 3)

Entrance Antiphon These are the holy men whom the Lord chose in his own perfect love; to them he gave eternal glory, alleluia.

Collect O God, who gladden us each year with the feast day of the Apostles Philip and James, grant us, through their prayers, a share in the Passion and Resurrection of your Only Begotten Son, so that we may merit to behold you for eternity. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 15: 1-8; Psalm 18; John 14: 6-14

Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Jesus answered: Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the

Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. (John 14:6-14)

Know Him! Throughout the Gospels we see that our Lord is addressed as Rabbi, Teacher, Master. From the beginning of his public ministry, even before his ministry began, this was a title which was used to address him. We read in the first chapter of St John's Gospel, that John the Baptist observed Jesus walking along and said to two of his disciples, "*There is the Lamb of God!*" He was implicitly directing them to leave him for One who was much greater than he. Thereupon

the two disciples followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and asked, "*What are you seeking?*" They said to him, "*Rabbi (which means Master, Teacher), where do you live?*" So from the outset of his ministry our Lord was recognized as guide, instructor, teacher – a master in the things of God. Throughout his ministry he was addressed as Rabbi even by his enemies when they wished to pose a question to him. At the Last Supper, when our Lord rose after having washed the feet of his disciples, he acknowledged that they called him Master and Lord – "*and rightly so, for that is what I am.*" Having risen from the dead, he spoke with Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday morning. She addressed him as *Rabbi*, or Teacher. In his Prologue, St John referred to him as the light of life – so he is a Light. Our Lord described himself as the Light of the world. The one who follows him walks in the light, whereas the one who refuses to follow him, is in the dark. Our Lord was viewed by the people as understanding fully the things of God, and as a teacher who spoke with an authority far greater than that of the scribes. He was never nonplussed, never caught out, and was never anything but the victor in debate. We read that the Pharisees learnt that

he *silenced the Sadducees*, and when they approached him with their trick question about taxes, they were overawed by his answer. Nothing seemed able to halt his supremacy as a Teacher. The Christian in his turn looks to Jesus Christ as the Way and the Truth. His teaching is our guide to heaven, and that teaching comes to us in the utterances of the Church built on the rock of Peter.

But our stance with respect to Jesus Christ is not simply that of listening to his *teaching*. He is not just a voice, a source of teaching. Islam looks upon Mahomet as its prophet and though it highly reveres Mahomet in this capacity, it endeavours to keep its focus on *Allah*. Mahomet, as Islam views it, passed on verbatim what Allah had revealed to him (through the Angel Gabriel). It is this perceived revelation, this *teaching*, which the Muslim thinks of and lives by. This is shown, I think, by the fact that Islam will not depict Mahomet – let alone his face. It wishes to think only of the *word* that Mahomet passed on as enshrined in the Koran. This is not the case with Jesus Christ. The disciple of Jesus Christ not only thinks of his teaching, but

even more, of *him*. The most essential feature of the Christian religion is the knowledge and love of the *person* of Jesus Christ. Obedience to his teaching is the test, the proof and the fruit of this love. Thus it is that while the face of Mahomet is not depicted by Islam, the face of Jesus Christ most certainly is depicted by Christianity. More than once Pope Benedict XVI referred to Jesus Christ as the *face* of the Father. Jesus is not just our Master but our *Lord* – the word "Lord" suggesting an altogether special veneration for his Person. It is a veneration showing itself in obedience to his teaching. All of this is suggested by our Lord's words in today's Gospel. "*No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.*" Our Lord is speaking of knowing him and knowing the Father – more is required than just knowing and following his teaching. "*Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Jesus answered: Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?*" Our Lord is

encouraging his disciples to "see" him, to know him, and through him to "see" and know the Father. Christ is not just Teacher (Master). He is also our Friend and Lord.

Philip and James came to know Jesus Christ and to love him passionately. To attain sanctity, of course, we must listen to our Lord and put his teaching into practice. Jesus said that it is not those who simply say to him, Lord! Lord! who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of his Father in heaven. But part and parcel of this, and indeed its foundation, is the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. At the Last Supper our Lord said during his prayer that "*Eternal life is this, to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*" So let us strive to know Jesus Christ more and more intimately, to love him more dearly, and on this basis to listen to him and obey.



Saint Matthias, Apostle (May 14)

Entrance Antiphon Jn 15: 16 It was not you who chose me, says the Lord, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last (E.T. alleluia).

Collect O God, who assigned Saint Matthias a place in the college of Apostles, grant us, through his intercession, that, rejoicing at how your love has been allotted to us, we may merit to be numbered among the elect. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Matthias (May 14) According to Acts 1:15-26, during the days after the Ascension, Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers (about 120 of Jesus' followers). Now that Judas had betrayed his ministry, it was necessary, Peter said, to fulfill the scriptural recommendation: "May another take his office." "Therefore, it is necessary that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went

among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection" (Acts 1:21-22). They nominated two men: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. They prayed and drew lots. The choice fell upon Matthias, who was added to the Eleven. Matthias is not mentioned by name anywhere else in the New Testament.

Scripture today: Acts 1:15-17, 20-26; Psalm 112; John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples, As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to

you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other. (John 15: 9-17)

Love and Suffering Matthias had been a disciple of Jesus Christ virtually from the beginning. There were others too. Peter is reported by Luke as saying, soon after the Ascension and prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, that there were among the community of believers "*men who have walked in our company all through the time when the Lord Jesus came and went among us, from the time when John used to baptize to the day when he, Jesus, was taken from us*" (Acts 1: 21). So amid all the hostility of the leaders, amid the serious walk-out by many disciples at the doctrine of the Eucharist (John ch. 6), amid the devastation of the Passion and Death of Jesus, there were many disciples who adhered to Jesus. St Paul mentions that 500 persons saw the risen Saviour, and many of them were still alive at the time of Paul's writing this 1 Cor. 15:6). For some reason two among the earliest

disciples stood out: Joseph Barsabas (presumably, the son of Sabas), who had been given the fresh name of Justus, and Matthias. Joseph's new name "Justus" is significant. It perhaps reflects his reputation among the disciples. These two were named to stand for election to the ranks of the Twelve. They must have been outstanding in some sense for them to receive this nomination. There had to be Twelve – so this number had come from the Lord. One had fallen away, so there had to be another to take his place. The figure "Twelve" harked back to the twelve patriarchs and signalled the new Covenant and the new people of God which was now the seed and the bearer of the Kingdom. At the wish of the Apostles and the infant Church, Matthias and Joseph Barsabas were named as candidates for the Apostolic college. *"They gave them lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias, and he took rank with the eleven apostles."* We are not told more, but as a member of the Twelve, Matthias at some point received the fullness of what the Church would come to call the ministerial priesthood – the episcopate.

But let us now consider what the reception of this new dignity really meant. Our Gospel passage today (John 15:9-17) makes it clear that the Twelve were called to a life of love – and the vocation of the Twelve is in this special sense a paradigm of the vocation of every disciple of Christ. Our Lord said to his Apostles at the Last Supper, "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*" Now, one can read this and have very pleasant feelings, all the while forgetting the sting at the end. That sting is the sting of self-sacrifice, of immolation, of rejection and persecution, involved in laying down one's life for the love of one's heart. The love that our Lord called the Twelve to was a love that truly involved suffering, and it is in this sense that the calling of Matthias and the Twelve was a mirror for all disciples. The Twelve went on to a life of witness amid

suffering and rejection, and from there to martyrdom or its equivalent. If there are times in the life and history of the Church when the successors of the Twelve are *not* made to suffer extraordinarily for Christ and his name, this must not be regarded as the ordinary course of things in the plan of God. Ordinarily, the Twelve, as well as their successors, as well as the disciples of Christ – if they are truly witnessing to the truth of Jesus and his teaching – will be made to suffer. Ordinarily they will suffer rejection and persecution in some form. This goes to the very top – to the successor of St Peter. It must be expected that he will suffer and be rejected. This is the cup the Father will expect him to drink. If a holy Pope is made to suffer rejection, it is a sign that God is sanctifying him. Has there ever been a canonized saint who has not suffered in a special manner? Bearing witness to Jesus amid more than ordinary suffering is a normal hallmark of progress in holiness.

Let us understand the character of Christian love. If anyone wishes to be my disciple, our Lord said, let him take up his cross every

day and follow me. Lots of people *seem* to have few crosses. I would not normally recommend that crosses be *sought*. But if they come undeserved, they will be a powerful means of personal sanctification and the sanctification of the world. When the world criticizes and rejects those who represent Christ in a special manner, they ought not be regarded simply as having failed. Rather, Christ is showing his special love for the one who suffers, and is making of him a great instrument of good. Christ succeeded through this kind of failure.



Solemnity of Our Lady Help of Christians (May 24)

Entrance Antiphon Who is this arising like the dawn, fair as the moon, resplendent as the sun, terrible as an army with banners (Canticle 6:10).

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who placed the love of Our Lady, Help of Christians in the hearts of those who brought the Catholic faith to these shores, grant, through her intercession, wisdom to our leaders and integrity to our citizens, so that, under her protection, Australia may know harmony, justice and peace. Through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, who lives....

Mary Help of Christians (May 24) In two of the most decisive battles in European history Christians sought the help of our Lady under the title of Help of Christians. In each of these two battles Christian civilization was under great military threat from Islam. Christians turned to Mary as their great help. The first of these battles was the Battle of Lepanto, October 7th, 1571. Almost 1000 years after Islam's first attack on the Christian world, the Mahomedans sent a giant naval

armada to attack Europe by sea. The whole of European and Christian civilization was under an immense threat. The Christian fleet under Don John of Austria encountered the Islamic fleet at Lepanto just off the coast of Greece. Pope St Pius V, entrusting the outcome to our Lady, ordered uninterrupted prayers to her throughout Christendom. During the actual battle Rosary processions thronged the streets of Europe and St Pius V with outstretched arms prayed to Mary in his chapel in the Vatican. It was a tremendous battle. The Turks slew 8,000 Christian soldiers and ship after ship of the Christian fleet sank. But due to the prayers of the Christians and the resolve of the Christian forces who were depending on the help of Mary, the tide began to turn. The upshot was that 30,000 Turks were killed or taken prisoner, and 12,000 Christian slaves released. The Christian forces were victorious. It was the first great defeat for the Turks at sea. Pope St Pius V made the feast of our Lady Help of Christians a universal feast. Not only was the Christian world saved, but it marked the turning point in the military fortunes of Islam. While Islam continued to remain a threat and continued to attack Christian countries, Lepanto

marked the dramatic beginning of a gradual decline. Our Lady help of Christians is the help of each Christian, and the help of Christian civilization against attack. The last great threat from Islam occurred over a hundred years after Lepanto. 200,000 Ottoman Turks besieged Vienna in the summer months of 1683, and the Austrian Emperor placed the outcome under the protection of Mary help of Christians. During those sombre weeks Pope Innocent XI united Christendom against the attack of Islam. In response to the Pope's call John Sobieski, the King of Poland arrived in September, and on September 8, the feast of our Lady's nativity, the battle plans were drawn up. On September 12, the feast of the holy name of Mary, the Christians gained a great victory over the Turks. The Christian forces had placed themselves under the protection of our Lady Help of Christians. It was a great Christian victory, and it was due to Mary the Help of Christians.

In 1841 the pioneer priest of the Catholic Church in Australia, Father John Therry, wrote to the Archbishop of Sydney, Archbishop

Polding, requesting that Australia be dedicated to Mary's name. Three years later in 1844 the bishops of Australia appointed Mary Help of Christians as the patroness of Australia. We Catholics in Australia look to Mary as the great defender of the Church and Christian civilization when under threat. The biggest danger is a weakening of our faith in her Son. Mary is our Helper. 'Do not let your hearts be troubled,' Christ tells us. 'Trust in God still, and trust in me.' Mary who is our help will support us in our trust in all adversities, so let us resolve to regard Mary as our help every day of our lives and in all our difficulties.

Scripture today: Genesis 3:1-15.20; Ephesians 3: 14-19; Luke 8:19-21

It happened that Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you. He replied, My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice. (Luke 8:19-21)

Mary our Help

If one were asked to name the most famous Catholic thinker in *English* history, the name of John Henry Newman would be among those who would immediately come to mind. His intellectual and religious formation was Anglican, and as an Anglican he worked his way to the Catholic Church. From being the most famous Anglican theologian in England he became the country's most famous Catholic theologian – although he is probably best described not strictly as a theologian, but as a seminal *religious* thinker present in a variety of disciplines. One of his most notable books was his last as an Anglican, in which he answered one of his own most persistent objections to the teaching of the Catholic Church. As an Anglican he objected to the apparent innovations to pristine Christian doctrine which the Church of Rome had gradually introduced over the centuries. These innovations amounted to corruptions of revealed teaching, he had thought, and an instance of this was the invocation of the saints – especially the invocation of the Virgin Mary. There seemed to be almost nothing of this in the New Testament, and yet it was rampant in Catholic teaching. His formal answer to the non-Catholic objection to

the change in Catholic doctrine over the centuries is contained in his epochal book, *The Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845). He writes that the innovations are not corruptions but developments that represent the Church's advancing understanding of divine Revelation. Having established this general idea, he offers several tests of a true development. During his own lifetime word reached him that Pius IX accepted his theory as his own private understanding of the matter. It is an hypothesis – a philosophical theory about doctrine – that has stood the test of time and is accepted now as assuredly true. Over the course of the centuries the Church comes to an explicit awareness of what it knows implicitly. It is in this light that the copious teaching of the Church on the Mother of Christ and the power of her intercession is to be understood. In our Gospel today Mary the mother of Jesus is referred to. She is among the relatives of Jesus and a message comes to him asking that she and his family circle wished to see him.

Our Lord uses the occasion to explain who are his real family. "*Someone told him, Your mother and brothers are standing*

outside, wanting to see you. He replied, My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (Luke 8: 19-21). The Catholic will see in these words a description of Christ's mother: she is the one par excellence who heard the word of God and put it in practice. She is *mother* to Christ according to Christ's own criteria as given in this passage of Luke's Gospel, in which Gospel much of what we know about our Lady is to be found. I am referring especially to the infancy narratives of that Gospel. The Angel addressed her as the one who was "*full of grace.*" She accepted the word of God as it came from him, and immediately gave to it her entire obedience: "*Be it done unto me according to your word.*" The power of her intercession is seen in the Gospel of St John, when at her word our Lord worked his first miracle at the wedding feast of Cana, and thus launched his public ministry. From the Cross he gave his mother to his beloved disciple to be his mother too, and to dwell with him. The Catholic Christian sees in this his gift to all of us of his mother. Since the early centuries, the Church's love for and confidence in the mother of Christ has constantly deepened. So it is that Mary the mother of

Christ is understood by all the faithful as being the Help of Christians. She is Christ's gift to us to be our mother and our model. At special times in the Church's history, times of unusual threat, the Church has invoked the intercession of Mary, Help of Christians. Not only does this apply to threats on the individual believer, but threats on nations and civilizations. One of the greatest instances of this was the threat to European and Christian civilization posed by the Islamic advance during the sixteenth century, a century riven by Christian division and strife, for it was the era of the Protestant Reformation. Prior to and during the encounter with the Islamic forces at Lepanto, a vast chorus of prayer ascended to heaven, calling on the intercession of Mary, Help of Christians.

The Turks were defeated. The point is that the intercession of Mary in heaven is immensely powerful. How could her Son refuse her requests? Let us look on Mary the mother of Christ as the unfailing help of Christians and as their mother and their model. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death!

She is full of grace. The Lord is with her. Blessed is she among all women, and blessed is the fruit of her womb, Jesus. Let us hear again the words of Christ - Behold your mother, and let us take her to our home, the home of our heart.

Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

(May 31)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 66 (65): 16 Come and hear, all who fear God; I will tell what the Lord did for my soul (E.T. alleluia).

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who, while the Blessed Virgin Mary was carrying your Son in her womb, inspired her to visit Elizabeth, grant us, we pray, that, faithful to the promptings of the Spirit, we may magnify your greatness with the Virgin Mary at all times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Visitation (May 31) This is a fairly late feast, going back only to the 13th or 14th century. It was established widely throughout the Church to pray for unity. The present date of celebration was set in 1969 in order to follow the Annunciation of the Lord (March 25) and precede the Birthday of John the Baptist (June 24). "Moved by charity, therefore, Mary goes to the house of her kinswoman.... While every word of Elizabeth's is filled with meaning, her final words would seem to have a fundamental importance: 'And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what had been spoken to her from the Lord' (Luke 1:45). These words can be linked with the title 'full of grace' of the angel's greeting. The fullness of grace announced by the angel means the gift of God himself. Mary's faith, proclaimed by Elizabeth at the visitation, indicates how the Virgin of Nazareth responded to this gift" (Pope John Paul II, *The Mother of the Redeemer*, 12).

Scripture today: Zephaniah 3: 14-18; Psalm - Isaiah 12; Luke 1: 39-56

At that time Mary arose and hastened to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished! And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been looked upon the lowliness of his handmaid. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me- holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his

servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. (Luke 1:39-56)

The Mighty One There are various theories of the foundations of ethics. There are the utilitarian or consequentialist theories of Bentham and Mill which stress that morality is determined on the basis of results. There is the deontological ethics of, say, Kant, which looks not to results but to the objective duty itself that pertains to certain acts. There is also what is called virtue ethics, one aspect of which is that it is the man of virtue who will be best able to judge what is a good act and therefore what is the objective duty. Without ever having called himself a "virtue ethics" man, Blessed John Henry Newman always stressed that fidelity to the conscience is necessary to arrive at religious and moral truth. The state of the heart is decisive in being able to judge aright in matters religious and moral. I would suggest we take the point a step further, and observe that it is the believer who is truly holy who is

able best to know – and therefore is our best guide in coming to know – what God is like. This brings us to our Gospel today for the feast of the Visitation of Mary to her kinswoman Elizabeth. The Gospel passage (Luke 1: 39-56) is notable for many reasons, not least for what Mary the mother of Christ says about God. The Angel Gabriel addressed her as one who was full of grace, and that the Lord was with her. She was bearing within her the Messiah. Her kinswoman Elizabeth (speaking under inspiration of the Holy Spirit) called her, in effect, the perfect believer, believing all that the Lord had uttered to her. She, the mother of her Lord, was blessed among women. The Church has taught that she was conceived and born in a state of holiness and that no sin ever touched her. In view of her very moral constitution, then, we may – following the point made by Newman about religious knowledge – regard Mary the mother of Christ as best equipped to tell us what God is like. This she does in the song of praise that comes from her lips following the salutation of Elizabeth. She tells us about God, so let us listen to her description of "the greatness of the Lord." Let us listen to holy Mary. She is our instructress as we seek to know what God is like.

God is not remote. Nor is he merely close. The things of this world are close: the air, the wind, the ground, the trees. But they, close as they are, appear indifferent to us and while in fact they sustain us, at times they threaten us. But God is *close to us as our Saviour*. He saves. The Virgin Mary exults in God who is her Saviour – as should we. But we struggle in his hand and wish to be out of it, going our own way. We must learn to submit to his will so as to remain close to him. If he remains close to us – "with us" as the Lord was "with" Mary – then he will save us. It is when, and to the extent that, we distance ourselves from him by our disobedience, that we place ourselves beyond his saving plan. As the Angel said to Mary, *the Lord was with her* – and because of this, he saved her. God was *her* Saviour, and he is ours. So let us remain *with Mary*! If we remain with her, the Lord will be with us, and as he was her Saviour, so too he will be ours. On this basis we may rejoice in the Lord our Saviour, just as Mary rejoiced in the Lord her Saviour. "*My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour*! St Paul writes that we ought rejoice in the Lord always – again, he says, rejoice! God is the one in whom we may trust and rejoice because he is our

Saviour. Mary proclaims him as the Mighty One, whose might is shown in his goodness and mercy. *"From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me- holy is his name."* In many religions the power of the deities is menacing, and this is because man offends them. He disregards the deities and does not observe their prescriptions, and therefore they menace him. Very often they dislike him. Their might is often a threat to them. But the Lord is different – as the Mighty One, the One of power, he is especially kind. He saves, and his might is our recourse. He does good things for us – even great things (*megala*), just as he did "great things" for Mary. He is especially the defender of the poor and the stricken, and takes their part against the proud, the rich and the mighty. He helps his servants and is faithful to his promises.

Wonderful God is the Lord! My soul rejoices in God my Saviour! He looks on us his lowly servants, and he does good things for us. He will help and defend us against all that threatens us. He is a mighty and merciful God, and Mary the Virgin is the exemplar of all

that he can do. His might is manifested in her. She is his work par excellence! Let us, together with her who is our mother and our model, cast ourselves in the hands of the living God, for he is our Saviour. With Mary at our side as our teacher, let us strive to know the living God, for as our Lord said at the Last Supper, eternal life is this, to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Memorial of St Barnabas, Apostle (June 11)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Acts 11:24 Blessed is this holy man, who was worthy to be numbered among the Apostles, for he was a good man, filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith.

Collect O God, who decreed that Saint Barnabas, a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit, should be set apart to convert the nations, grant that the Gospel of Christ, which he strenuously preached, may be faithfully proclaimed by word and by deed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St. Barnabas (June 11) Barnabas is spoken of simply as one who dedicated his life to the Lord. He was a man "filled with the Holy Spirit and faith. Thereby large numbers were added to the Lord." Even when he and Paul were expelled from Antioch in Pisidia (modern-day Turkey), they were "filled with joy and the Holy Spirit."

Scripture today: Acts 11:21-26;13:1-3; Psalm 97; Matthew 10:7-13

Jesus said to his disciples: 'And as you go, proclaim that the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, drive out devils. You received without charge, give without charge. Provide yourselves with no gold or silver, not even with coppers for your purses, with no haversack for the journey or spare tunic or footwear or a staff, for the labourer deserves his keep. Whatever town or village you go into, seek out someone worthy and stay with him until you leave. As you enter his house, salute it, and if the house deserves it, may your peace come upon it; if it does not, may your peace come back to you.' (Matthew 10:7-13)

The Mission One of the things for which the Church wins the immediate acclaim of the world is her care of the poor. During the last two decades of her life, Mother Teresa of Calcutta was a household name across the world, recognized as the saint she was – because of her remarkable care for the poor. For many, the beginning and the end of her stardom was her care for the afflicted and neglected. They did not realize that the beginning and end of her stardom was actually her *love for Jesus Christ* and her recognition of *him* as the Catholic Church proclaims him. What she wanted more than anything else was that *Christ* be recognized as Lord – and because of him that the poor of the world be served. No one would criticize the Church for conducting hospitals and schools, especially if they benefit the poor. It is a natural recognition of man's moral sense that one ought act justly and generously towards one's fellow man, especially towards the one in need. It is a natural law of man's nature which when seen to be observed is accorded praise and commendation. When the poor are neglected, there is a sense of natural guilt and condemnation. Of course, this is not merely a law of the natural moral order instinctively

perceived by man, but it is emphatically confirmed by divine revelation. God has revealed that one must love one's fellow man, and take generous care of the poor and neglected. Jesus Christ had much to say about this – and we need only think of his parables of the Good Samaritan and the Poor Man Lazarus. So much is this so that popularly the notion of a “Christian” is that of a person who is generous towards others, especially to those in need. But – and this is the point here – this popular impression can miss the essential thing in what it is to be a “Christian”. We can forget the *person of Jesus Christ* and the absolute need of every man to *know him*. This brings us to the heart of the Church's celebration of an Apostle such as Barnabas. As the Entrance Antiphon states, Barnabas was a “holy man, who was worthy to be numbered among the Apostles, for he was a good man, filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith.” The Holy Spirit was the Spirit of *Christ*, and Barnabas was filled with faith in *Christ*. *Christ* was the centre of his life, and he spent himself bringing the Good News of *Christ* to others, dying eventually for *Christ*.

The Gospels tell us that Christ named the Twelve “Apostles” – they were his envoys, his ambassadors. Clearly this title came to be used of others too who were Christ’s envoys. Paul states that he is an “Apostle”, though he was not one of the Twelve. The Church dubs Barnabas an “Apostle”. He was an envoy, an ambassador of Christ. Christ was his love and the object of his heart. He was a man also sent to *proclaim Christ to others*, and this he did before meeting Paul, in collaboration with Paul, and after that direct collaboration came to a close. Once he was converted to Jesus Christ, he spent his life for Jesus Christ and bringing his person to others. This was the principal *service* he rendered to others. We are reminded by his life of the foremost importance of bringing the person of Jesus before the attention of others and winning their hearts to him. *This* form of service, commanded by Jesus Christ, may or may not be appreciated by the world with anything like the accord which, say, *service of the poor* and neglected might gain. An extremely dedicated doctor, or nurse, or social worker, or person who goes out among the derelicts and homeless, is admirable and pleasing to God (if he does all this for right

motives). Any normal person with sound moral instincts will recognize this. But in an age which disregards God and the supernatural the danger is that a service which brings the name of God to others will not be appreciated. Indeed, it may well be regarded as a bothersome, irrelevant and unwelcome imposition. But this is what the world and everyone in it truly needs, far more than any material benefit because what is at stake is eternity. As John Henry Newman wrote at the end of his great book, *The Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), life is short and eternity long. God the Creator and Father of all wants us to serve one another and especially those in material and temporal need, but most of all does he want us to enable all to get to heaven. Christ did not come to liberate all lepers on the face of the earth from their leprosy, nor to cure all the blind and the deaf-mutes. He did cure many, and he commanded his disciples to do what they could to cure the sick. But most of all he wished them to proclaim that the Kingdom of God had come.

That Kingdom was present in him and was to be accessed by union with him. The one who believes in him and is baptized has eternal life. This is what has to be brought to the whole world. As our Lord said to his disciples at the very last commission in Galilee, *Go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 28). We are reminded of this when we celebrate an Apostle such as Barnabas. All of us share in this indispensable mission. This is the heart of the call of the Church to a new evangelization of, firstly, the Church herself and, secondly, of the world. Christ must be proclaimed and discovered anew. Let us begin again in this fundamental work. This is the work of God, our Lord tells his hearers in John 6. You must believe in the one God has sent. That is our calling and our mission. So now I begin!



Memorial of St John Fisher and St Thomas More

(June 22)

Collect O God, who in martyrdom have brought true faith to its highest expression, graciously grant that, strengthened through the intercession of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More, we may confirm by the witness of our life the faith we profess with our lips. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Thomas More (June 22) (1477-1535) Thomas More studied at the University of Oxford, married and had a son and three daughters. He was a great lawyer and was appointed Chancellor of the kingdom. He wrote a number of works about civil affairs and in defence of the Catholic religion, and some spiritual works as well. More was a literary scholar, eminent lawyer, gentleman, father of four children and chancellor of England. An intensely spiritual man, he would not support the king's divorce from Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn. Nor would he acknowledge Henry as supreme head of

the Church in England, breaking with Rome and denying the pope as head. More was committed to the Tower of London to await trial for treason: not swearing to the Act of Succession and the Oath of Supremacy. Beheaded on Tower Hill, London, July 6, 1535, he steadfastly refused to approve Henry VIII's divorce and remarriage and establishment of the Church of England. Four hundred years later, in 1935, Thomas More was canonized a saint of God.

St. John Fisher (1469-1535) John Fisher is usually associated with Erasmus, Thomas More and other Renaissance humanists. His life, therefore, did not have the external simplicity found in the lives of some saints. Rather, he was a man of learning, associated with the intellectuals and political leaders of his day. He was interested in the contemporary culture and eventually became chancellor at Cambridge. He had been made a bishop at 35, and one of his interests was raising the standard of preaching in England. Fisher himself was an accomplished preacher and writer. His sermons on the penitential psalms were reprinted seven times before his death. With the coming

of Lutheranism, he was drawn into controversy. His eight books against heresy gave him a leading position among European theologians. In 1521 he was asked to study the problem of Henry VIII's marriage. He incurred Henry's anger by defending the validity of the king's marriage with Catherine and later by rejecting Henry's claim to be the supreme head of the Church of England. John was summoned, in feeble health, to take the oath to the new Act of Succession. He and Thomas More refused because the Act presumed the legality of Henry's divorce and his claim to be head of the English Church. They were sent to the Tower of London, where Fisher remained 14 months without trial. They were finally sentenced to life imprisonment and loss of goods. When the two were called to further interrogations, they remained silent. Fisher was tricked, on the supposition he was speaking privately as a priest, and declared again that the king was not supreme head. The king, further angered that the pope had made John Fisher a cardinal, had him brought to trial on the charge of high treason. He was condemned and executed.

Scripture (from Common of Martyrs): Revelation 21:5-7; Psalm 125;

Matthew 10:28-33

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven. (Matthew 10: 28-33)

Supreme Sacrifice There have been numbers of persons in history who have faced and passed through death because of their convictions. Those convictions have been of greater or lesser moral value and, accordingly, their sacrifice has been judged variously. Ultimately the value of a person's sacrifice of life and property has stood on the value of his convictions and his

behaviour. For instance, the death of an extremist Islamic suicide bomber who enters a crowded part of the city and detonates his bomb sending himself and those around him to their deaths, is despised and condemned – as is his sincerity and his convictions. A father, however, who dives into the sea to rescue his struggling son, and then loses his life in the process, is regarded with the highest praise. There has always been a recognition that the giving of one's life *for a noble reason* is truly admirable. But I would propose that it was Jesus Christ who, more than any other, established this high benchmark in human history and culture. Mahomet did not die a martyr, but in his bed at the end of a fairly long and successful life, surrounded by his wives and held in honour by his followers as “The Prophet”. The Buddha did not give his life for his high cause, nor did Confucius, nor did Zoroaster. Christ died on the Cross in witness to the truth of his Person and teaching, and, he said, those who love the truth listen to his voice. He promised his disciples the same general upshot. They must be prepared to renounce themselves, take up their “Cross” every day and follow in his footsteps. That “Cross” was the means and the result

of his and their bearing witness to the Truth – and he himself is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Yes, it was Christ who set this lofty benchmark that has come to be called “martyrdom” – although (as has been said) this word has been debased and used for the giving of one’s life for the very worst motives. Now, Christ did not see his death as his being trapped and overcome by his opponents – being suddenly grabbed and done away with. It was the intended high point of his life. It was predicted by the Scriptures as the means to glory for himself and for all. In the Plan of God, the Messiah had to suffer. So, both the Scriptures before him, and he himself in his teaching and actions, set forth Death as the summit of life’s mountain. It was not just a terrible mishap. It was life’s main accomplishment, the supreme achievement and source of immense fruit.

This, in the annals of history, is a somewhat new idea and has had great influence on human thought. To take one example from our saints for today, Thomas More (1478 – 1535) was Lord Chancellor of England to King Henry VIII from October 1529 to 16 May 1532. He

was a powerful literary opponent of the Protestant Reformation and in particular of Martin Luther and William Tyndale. He refused to sanction Henry's demand to be recognized as Supreme Head of the Church of England in the Act of Supremacy of 1534. In that year he was imprisoned for his refusal to take the Oath required by the First Succession Act – because that Act in effect rejected papal authority and the papal declaration of the validity of Henry's marriage to Queen Catherine of Aragon. At the beginning of July 1535 More was tried and convicted on perjured testimony – they could not get the better, by legal means, of the best lawyer in the land. Immediately following his sentence he declared the reason why his conscience forbade him to do as the King had demanded. No “*temporal lord could or ought to be head of the Spirituality.*” Further, there can be “*no authority, without the common consent of all Christians, to make a law or Act of Parliament or Council against the union of Christendom.*” He stood by “*all the general Councils for a thousand years.*” On the scaffold he said that he “*died in and for the faith of the Holy Catholic Church, a faithful servant, both of God and the King.*” His death sent a shock of horror

and indignation through the whole of Christendom, including even Henry VIII – who turned upon Anne Boleyn with the words, “*thou art the cause of this man’s death.*” Erasmus saluted More as one “*whose soul was more pure than any snow, whose genius was such that England never had and never again will have its like.*” Two centuries later, Jonathan Swift said he was “*the person of the greatest virtue this kingdom ever produced*” (*Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, v. 13, Oxford UP, 1959, p. 123), a sentiment with which Samuel Johnson agreed. Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper said in 1977 that More was “*the first great Englishman whom we feel that we know, the most human of saints*”. One of the most notable things in the letters of Saint Thomas More is his reference to the Conscience. In effect, Conscience was the echo of the voice of God uttering the truth, which he, the most prudent and careful of thinking men, heard and obeyed.

Conscience is, as Cardinal Newman would write nearly 350 years later, the “*aboriginal vicar of Christ.*” Hearing the voice of his conscience, More knew he was hearing the voice of Jesus Christ. It was

a cause of profound distress to him that his own beloved family – and he was an exemplary husband and father – could not understand him. Even his daughter Meg chose to swear the Oath (though we know that in her case the qualification “*so far as the law of God allows*” was tolerated). But he went forward to make the supreme sacrifice, following in the footsteps of the Master whom he loved above all and who had set the benchmark. “*Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command*” (John 15: 9-17). Christ was Thomas More’s friend.



Vigil of the Birth of John the Baptist (June 23)

Nativity of John the Baptist (June 24) Born six months before our Lord, St. John the Baptist was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, our Lady's cousin. He was the last and greatest of the prophets. As the forerunner of the Saviour, he had the mission of preparing the Jews for the coming of Christ. When Jesus had come, St. John bore witness to him before his own followers and encouraged them to follow him.

Entrance Antiphon Luke 1: 15, 14 He will be great in the sight of the Lord and will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb; and many will rejoice at his birth.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that your family may walk in the way of salvation and, attentive to what Saint John the Precursor urged, may come safely to the One he foretold, our Lord Jesus Christ. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture for Vigil Mass: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 70;

1 Peter 1:8-12; Luke 1:5-17

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many

will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’ (Luke 1:5-17)

God’s Plan I think that most elderly persons looking back on their lives would say that it followed a course which, in countless details and respects, they did not expect. That is to say, life is complex and unpredictable – for *man*. Mysteriously, it is not complex and unpredictable for *God* because all things, past present and future, are present to him who is the Sustainer and Ruler of all. What is perhaps especially fascinating for us who are his creatures is that we have a destiny which in some sense is divinely premeditated. St Paul writes that *before the world began God chose us in Christ to be holy and full*

of love in his sight. We were chosen and intended for a certain path – the path of sanctity. Let us take the Gospel for the vigil of the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-17) as illustrating this. The angel appears to Zechariah and *predicts* that he will have a son and then spells out his *intended* future – that future intended by God. “*You are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.*” We are speaking here of a divine prediction about a free creature, one who was not, therefore, *compelled* by God to do his will. His greatness was to be the work of God’s grace, but it involved also the perfectly free exercise of the future John’s own power of choice. Satan had been endowed with free choice, and used it to rebel against his Creator. So were Adam and Eve

endowed with free will, and they rebelled too – repenting at some point afterwards. God had his plan for them but they thwarted it, which is always very possible from the very nature of the gift of freedom. But what John the Baptist's life shows is the power of God to attain his ends. What might help us appreciate this is to consider the power of God's Providence in bringing each of us into existence.

We were, as we read in St Paul, *chosen* before the world began. So God has had each of us in mind from eternity. But consider the unimaginable and countless factors of a seemingly chance character which had to combine to bring into being any one person. Each person's birth has depended on their parents having met, on their grandparents and all their ancestors having met and on all the myriad of factors entailed in their coming to be, over *millennia*. All this was embraced in the creative and providential plan of God for each individual person. It was God who brought it about amid the vast unfolding of the world and the unpredictable maze of human choices. How unfathomable the might of God's fatherly Providence in

bringing each person to be! Now, if God has done that for each of us, can we not trust his loving power to bring to fruition his will for our sanctification and our mission in life? He did it for John! He announced his plan for him and his plan came to fruition. John became a great prophet, a great saint, and one who fulfilled what God had planned for him. All God asks is that, as free creatures, we cooperate with him by endeavouring to do his will – and repenting sincerely when we fail to do so. But we must start with faith in God for who he has revealed himself to be. We must *believe* that he is indeed all-powerful, all-merciful, all-wise, and has the power and qualities to achieve his plans for us. The first thing which man thinks of in thinking of God is his power. It is because of his need of God's power that he turns to him. In the case of the God of Revelation – the true God – this power is revealed to be unlimited. *All things* are possible for God. But paradoxically it is precisely this which man fails to believe, or once believing fails to persevere in believing. Once we run into difficulties we tend to give up on God and fail in belief. When Simon Peter spoke to our Lord across the water amid the turbulent Sea of Galilee, Christ

bade him come to him across the water. Simon unhesitatingly began his short trek, but then feeling the waves and the wind, began to lose faith and sink. Christ reached for him, held him fast and said, *Man of little faith, why did you doubt?* Now, what is the will of God for us? This is the will of God, St Paul writes, *your sanctification*.

Each one of us is the object of divine choice from all eternity. We have been chosen in Christ from before the world began *to be holy and full of love* in God's sight. His almighty over-arching Providence has brought each of us into existence and to the light of day, and he sustains us with his creative touch to this point. He had a plan for John the Baptist which he announced before his birth – and this came to fruition over the course of John's life culminating in his glorious martyrdom. If God can do that for John, can he not bring each of us to where he intends? Of course he can, and we must place our faith in God's almighty power which ever reveals itself in mercy, mercy for me and mercy for you. This is the Good News of the Gospel, that God can indeed do it. All he asks for is our daily co-operation

according to our best lights, and a constant readiness to repent. So then,
now I begin!



The Birth of John the Baptist (June 24)

Entrance Antiphon Jn 1: 6-7; Luke 1: 17 A man was sent from
God, whose name was John. He came to testify to the light, to prepare
a people fit for the Lord.

Collect O God, who raised up Saint John the Baptist to make ready a
nation fit for Christ the Lord, give your people, we pray, the grace of
spiritual joys and direct the hearts of all the faithful into the way of
salvation and peace. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture: Isaiah 49:1-6; Psalm 138;

Acts 13: 22-26; Luke 1:57-66.80

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, No! He is to be called John. They said to her, There is no one among your relatives who has that name. Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, His name is John. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbours were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, What then is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand was with him. And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel (Luke 1:57-66.80).

Mercy Looking back into his family history a researcher discovers that his great-great-great-great grandparents met by an unusual accident. The future husband was riding through the town where his future spouse lived, and his horse stumbled. He fell and was injured. At that very point she was in the same street walking to the stores and went to his assistance, going on from there to nurse him. They took a great liking to one another, married and had a large family and lived out a good and successful life. They had numerous descendants, of which the researcher was one. The researcher observed that his own existence, and that of so many others had depended on that fall from the horse of his ancestor, together with the coincidence of his future spouse being in the same street at that same moment. Why did the horse fall? It may have been for the slightest of reasons – indeed, the entire sequence of events involved the tiniest of coincidences all along the way. If he had been delayed in his horse-ride for but five minutes, everything may have been different. Indeed, the entire history of the universe depends on an incalculable number of coincidences. Each of us are products of an unending number of

hair's-breadth occurrences which may easily have been different. But, by his almighty power, those coincidences making up the march of history were the means whereby God brought into existence every single person, each of whom he had chosen from all eternity. From before the world, St Paul, writes, God chose us. The thought of the coincidences of history helps us to appreciate the infinite might of divine providence. God can do anything, and he brought me into existence at a particular point, even though that point depended on an incalculable range of factors. He, the First Cause, worked in and through countless secondary causes. I mention this feature of the world to set forth the might of God in achieving his purposes, and also his mercy. That each of us exists, is a mercy. We, each of us, need not have existed, and we only have to think of human history to realize this. But God in his powerful mercy brought us out of nothing.

Our life is a gift of mercy. We ought look on the life and person of each and every human being as also a gift of God's mercy. All of this brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 1: 57-66.80), which portrays

the birth of John the Baptist. What is the first thing we see others saying of it? It is a gift of the divine mercy. *"When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy."* The birth of John the Baptist was part of the plan of God, and was the expression of his love. Let us notice what is said about John's boyhood, his youth and his early adulthood. *"The neighbours were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, What then is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand was with him. And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel."* Especially significant is the statement that *"the hand of the Lord was with him."* John the Baptist had an altogether special mission, and God was preparing him for it with great gifts of grace. He responded magnificently to those gifts and became a great saint. But now, the hand of the Lord has been with each of us too, especially with each and every disciple of Christ. Before he was born, and at the visit

of Mary to Elizabeth, John was filled with the Holy Spirit. At our Baptism, we were filled with the Holy Spirit. The hand of the Lord was with us – meaning the special favour of his grace. To a greater or lesser extent we strayed, but the hand of the Lord did come upon us. Are we now in the state of grace? If we are, the hand of the Lord is with us still. If we are not, then let us be reconciled to God and come under his hand once again. The hand of the Lord is available to be with us, now and in the future. It was once with us; let us then ensure it stays with us to the end. It will, if we constantly repent of sin and regain the grace of God. Let us resolve not to fall from grace, but to remain under the hand of the Lord. Being in his favour is all that matters.

The birth of John the Baptist was the gong that began the pealing of a great bell. The bell began to sound for the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah has come and has done his great work, and the world has before it the offer of redemption. We have the gift not only of life but of a calling to be disciples of Christ. It is a great mercy, and

the hand of the Lord is with us, if we but stay with him. Let us keep close to God, doing his will every day, living as disciples of the Master.



Vigil of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (June 28)

Saints Peter and Paul. (d. 64 & 67) Peter was chosen by Christ to be his first Vicar on earth; he was endowed with powers of the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 16: 13-19) and charged with the role of Shepherd of Christ's flock (John 21: 15-17). In Peter and his successors, we have a visible sign of unity and communion in faith and charity. Divine grace led Peter to profess Christ's divinity. St. Peter suffered martyrdom under Nero, in about the year 64 AD. He was buried at the hill of the Vatican where recent excavations have revealed his tomb on the site of St Peter's Basilica. Paul was chosen to form part of the apostolic college (without being one of the Twelve) by Christ himself. His mission was to bring Christ's name to the Gentiles. He was beheaded in the Tre Fontane along the Via Ostiense and buried nearby, on the spot of the Basilica of his name.

Entrance Antiphon Peter the Apostle, and Paul the teacher of the Gentiles, these have taught us your law, O Lord.

Collect Grant, we pray, O Lord our God, that we may be sustained by the intercession of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, that, as through them you gave your Church the foundations of her heavenly office, so through them you may help her to eternal salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture: Acts 3:1-10; Psalm 18; Galatians 1:11-20; John 21:15-19

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’ Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’ The third time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ He said, ‘Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will

stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, ‘Follow me!’ (John 21:15-19)

The Christian Religion Let us ask this question: What is the impression of the deity which most prevails among the peoples of the ages? No simple answer can be given, of course. The deity is perceived as great, powerful, usually good, and the one to whom man has recourse in resolving his numerous difficulties. But one perceived feature is the deity’s *distance* from man. I am not speaking here of the numerous lesser deities and spirits, but especially of the *high god*, whoever he might be. In respect to classic philosophy, we might take Aristotle’s First Cause, his Pure Act – well, this divine principle is still *distant*. Now, this distance which is a feature of divine transcendence very easily appears as a *lack of concern*. There is little or nothing he needs from us (though he requires things from us), and so we are easily led to make little effort to engage with him. We see this reflected in the

entire Deist current of thought which, I do think, is far more widespread at the grassroots level of secular Western culture than we might assume. The existence of God is acknowledged, but he is taken as being far away and uninvolved with us. But of course all this is entirely wrong, as we learn from Revealed Religion. It turns out that God ardently desires our love, our entire love. So much is this his desire that he commands it. We are commanded to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. God does not desire this because of a lack in himself which we his creatures complement, but because of his boundless love which is his nature and his gift. This is one of the many mysteries of God that he loves each person as if that person were the exclusive object of his entire love. At the same time, God loves each precisely as a member of a family – the large family that is God’s chosen people, the Church, and the large family that is the human race. We are all God’s children, the object of his divine love. This is the first great corrective to what we might call natural religion, that while in a real sense God is distant (in the sense of transcendent), he is *not unconcerned*. Indeed he is unimaginably near (not only in his

creative and sustaining touch but) in his personal love. God truly loves me as my Father. The true religion is revealed to be one in which God is perceived as utter love.

This is precisely the point in the conversation between the risen Jesus and Simon Peter, given to us in our passage today (John 21:15-19) from the last chapter of St John's Gospel. There stands Simon, gazing on the Son of God. The very incarnation – God the Son becoming man – is a manifestation of the love of God for us. There he stands, the risen Jesus, talking with Simon Peter. And what does he say? He wants to be assured by Simon of his love for him. *When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' 'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.'* Jesus said, *'Feed my lambs.'* Again Jesus said, *'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.'* Jesus said, *'Take care of my sheep.'* The third time he said to him, *'Simon son of John, do you love me?'* What is so very clear in this is that Jesus Christ, the most high Son of God, himself equal to the Father

in all things except the divine fatherhood, wants Simon – and all of us his disciples – to love him. Today we think of Simon – and we think of the love that he knew Jesus had for him, and his great love for Jesus in return. In this, Simon stands for all of us. It is not just that Christ has chosen to love us. He wants us to love him in return. One of the striking things about the well-known revelations to St Margaret Mary Alacoque in the seventeenth century and the revelations to St Faustina Kowalska in the twentieth century is the pleading by Christ for the love of all. He wants them to love him, and he is offended and hurt by their lack of love. All this is to say that the Christian religion is essentially a religion of personal love between Jesus Christ and his disciples. Today we also celebrate St Paul who was filled with the consciousness of Christ's love for him. As he wrote, Christ loved me and gave himself up for me. It is this profound consciousness of the love of Christ for him that drove Paul in his herculean labours to bring Christ to as many as possible. It is not, though, simply a matter of Jesus and me. I am a member of a family – the family of Christ's disciples, and the family of mankind. I am essentially in relation with them, and Jesus loves me as

a member of his family. My destiny is to be with Jesus and all his family.

Now, having said that, there is a second great feature of the Christian religion which is very evident in our Gospel passage for the feast of St Peter and St Paul. It is that friendship with Jesus, which is the essence of the Christian religion, involves taking part in *his mission*. That mission is to bring as many as possible into friendship with Jesus, making them members of his flock. The vocation of all mankind is friendship with Jesus. It is as simple and as difficult as that. On the mountain in Galilee we read how our Lord gave to his disciples a final commission (Matthew 28). It was to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That is to say, *all are called* to friendship with Jesus as members of his Church. To the work, then!



Solemnity of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (June 29)

Entrance Antiphon These are the ones who, living in the flesh,
planted the Church with their blood; they drank the chalice of the Lord
and became the friends of God.

Collect O God, who on the Solemnity of the Apostles Peter and Paul give us the noble and holy joy of this day, grant, we pray, that your Church may in all things follow the teaching of those through whom she received the beginnings of right religion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: (Mass of the Day) Acts 12:1-11; Psalm 33;

2 Timothy 4: 6-8.17-18; Matthew 16:13-19

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, Who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I

am? Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 13: 16-19).

Christ If one compares the curriculum of studies for the Bachelor's degree of Oxford at, say, the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the curriculum of studies for Bachelor's degrees in English-speaking universities two centuries later, the differences are remarkable. In the year 1800, by and large there were two disciplines studied at Oxford in the Bachelor's programme, Mathematics and classical Latin and Greek literature. By the year 2000 the range of disciplines was almost unending. There are strengths and weaknesses in the present situation, but one advance (of recent decades) has been the widespread academic

study of the religions of man. It is now a relatively easy matter to launch into a tertiary career of the study of comparative religion. I mention this as an introduction to our Gospel today, because a comparative study of the great leaders of religion sets forth the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. If we consider ancient Israel, prior to Jesus Christ the most significant (though not only) personage in the religion of the Hebrews was the *prophet*. Israel was what it was in large (though not exclusive) measure because of the *prophet* – the man to whom God had spoken his word and to whom God had given a mission to bring that word to his chosen people. Abraham was the father of his people, and is our father in faith, as St Paul expresses it. But he was also a *prophet*: he received God's word, acted on it, and brought it to others. Moses was a great *prophet*, and other things besides. There was a great line of *prophets* in Israel, and they formed the chosen people by pointing to God and to his will which they announced. Now, this prophetic feature in the religion of Israel has its parallel, its reflection, in other great religions too. Mahomet claimed to be, and was accepted by his disciples as being, a "prophet" – indeed, as the greatest of

prophets. Zarathustra centuries before Mahomet had acted as a "prophet." The followers of Buddha might claim for him a similar status, and those of Confucius for him too – though, of course, Buddha and Confucius did not profess to speak for *God*. And, it is characteristic of the primal religion to have its *shaman*. The prophet or shaman points to the Unseen and makes its will known.

The prophet or shaman fades before the One he represents and of which he presents himself as the oracle. St John the Baptist had, according to the word of Jesus Christ, no peer born of woman. Before the coming of Christ, he was the greatest of the *prophets*, and he described himself as a mere voice. But Jesus Christ is no mere voice. He is not just a prophet. He is not just an oracle of God – though he is all of this as well. He himself is the very *Object* of religion. No Muslim would claim that Mahomet is to be worshipped, but that Christ is to be worshipped is exactly the claim of the Christian. It was the claim of the two great apostles of Jesus Christ whom we celebrate today, the Feast of the apostles Peter and Paul. Our

Gospel passage today (Matthew 13: 16-19) is a magnificent passage because it presents the testimony of Simon Peter about Jesus Christ, and Christ's acceptance of this testimony. Some were saying that Jesus was another prophet – among the greatest of them, perhaps, but no more than a prophet nevertheless. But no. He was the long-awaited Messiah, and the very Son of the living God. This was an extraordinary attainment of Simon Peter, not only to have perceived that Jesus was the *Messiah*, but that he was God's *Son*. As we read in the Gospel of St John, the leaders of the Jews wished to stone our Lord for claiming to be God's *Son*, because by that claim he made himself equal to God. They perceived correctly. That was indeed his claim, and it was in witness to this truth that our Lord freely submitted to death to atone for the sin of the world. St Peter and St Paul stand for the truth about Jesus Christ. He is the long-awaited Messiah who fulfilled God's saving promises. He is the Son of the Living God who died for our sins and, by his gift of the Holy Spirit, gave us a share in his divine life. These two apostles also stand for the truth of Christ's Church, founded on the visible rock that is St Peter and his successors, and

brought to the world by her members, so well represented by the grandest of her missionaries, St Paul. In celebrating Peter and Paul we celebrate Jesus Christ and his Catholic Church.

"He who sees me, sees the Father," Jesus said. Whoever among the world's prophets and founders of religions claimed this before, and with holiness of life and numerous miracles to back it up? No one. It would have been preposterous. Jesus went to his death bearing witness to it, and rose from the dead as he had foretold. His claims were unique and extraordinary, and he provided all that was needed for conviction as to their absolute truth. Peter and Paul stand for the Church's total acceptance that Jesus Christ is Lord and Redeemer. He is the pearl beyond all price, the one for whom we ought sell all in order to gain.

Second reflection (Matthew 16: 13 19)

The Church and The Keys A slogan of many modern Christians is, Christ I accept but the Church I reject: Christ yes, the Church no! This could be looked on as a fallout from the classic Protestant rejection

of the divine institution of the Catholic Church. Of course Christ is indeed the great love of the Christian and of the Church. The Church cannot take the place of Christ. But it is very clear from Scripture that Christ entrusted to the Church, and in particular to the Church's pastors – more particularly still to the chief pastor – the "*keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.*" "*I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.*" That is to say, people would gain access to Jesus Christ and to his Kingdom through the Church which is authorised to unlock the doors to him, and therefore to every heavenly blessing.

So let us love the Church and make it our business to represent the Church well before others, drawing them to the Church so that they can gain access to the Redeemer and all he offers mankind. This is exactly what St Peter and St Paul did.



Feast of St Thomas the Apostle (July 3)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 118 (117): 28, 21 You are my God, and I confess you; you are my God, and I exalt you; I will thank you, for you became my saviour.

Collect Grant, almighty God, that we may glory in the Feast of the blessed Apostle Thomas, so that we may always be sustained by his intercession and, believing, may have life in the name of Jesus Christ your Son, whom Thomas acknowledged as the Lord. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St. Thomas the Apostle (July 3) Among the apostles, Thomas is remembered mainly for his doubts about the resurrection of Christ. Eight days after the Resurrection, he made up for his unbelief with a profession of faith, "My Lord and my God! (Jn 20:28). According to tradition, he preached the Gospel in India, where he was martyred.

Scripture today: Ephesians 2: 19-22; Psalm 116; John 20: 24-29

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord! But he said to them, Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it. A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you! Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe. Thomas said to him, My Lord and my God! Then Jesus told him, Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. (John 20: 24-29)

Likelihood In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates and Phaedrus are presented as discussing what advice should be offered to students of speechmaking. That is to say, how is the speaker to convince hearers of the truth of what he is saying? One means is the use of probabilities, of

likelihoods – of *eikota*. *Eikos* is likelihood. I accept something as true because I perceive it as being entirely likely. Aristotle allows for this, although it has been said that likelihood, probability, plausibility – the way things can be normally expected to go in familiar situations and everyday experiences – was lost sight of in logic for nearly two millennia (Walton). As against the *eikos*, (a likelihood, which gives plausibility to something), there is the *semeion*, or the direct "sign," something which amounts to plain evidence. St John in his Gospel commonly refers to the miracles that our Lord worked as *semeia*. The miracle of the water turned into wine was the first of the "signs" that Jesus worked and which manifested his glory (2:11). It was not a likelihood as to Christ's glory, but a *plain fact that manifested* it. So there are at least two kinds of evidence. There is the event that is an *eikos*, giving likelihood or probability to something, and there is the *semeion*, which manifests the fact. I mention this as an introduction to the problem of faith in the lives of many – including the problem of faith for Saint Thomas in the immediate aftermath of the Resurrection. For many people, the only form of proof is the strictly

mathematical or scientific proof. It must be a fact open to empirical testing. They will only accept as absolutely certain whatever is verified mathematically or according to empirical tests. There must be "hard evidence." This means, so they deem, that the Supernatural is an unproven hypothesis, and only that can be taken to be true which falls within the Natural realm. We must all be philosophical Naturalists. This is not merely a mindset of a certain class of the educated – it has become an assumption in one degree or another of many in all classes of society. In this, the Supernatural is not accepted as at all "likely." But the fact is that even in ordinary life "likelihood" is plainly a common basis of conviction. I know I shall die, not because my case has already been tested, but because of its overwhelming likelihood. Everyone else has died, so it would be absurd for me to think I shall be an exception.

St Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared to the Apostles on the evening of the day he rose from the dead. The Apostles certainly had no sense of the likelihood of Christ's rising from the dead, despite

his having at various times referred to it. They refused to believe those who had seen him in the morning of that day. Of course, while they had no "theory" of the grounds of valid conviction, it is plain that they had no working use of *likelihood* in this particular case. A resurrection from the dead went so radically against all their experience that it was entirely *unlikely*, even though, as believers in Jesus Christ who had worked so many miracles before their eyes and who was so incomparably holy, they ought to have accepted his own predictions. He predicted that he would suffer, die, and *rise* on the third day. That ought to have made it *likely* for them, even if it went totally against their experience of life and the world. But no, all that was forgotten, and the weight of tangible and sense experience was decisive for them. So they refused to believe, and it was only when they actually saw our Lord, heard him, touched him and observed him eating before their eyes that they joyfully accepted the fact. To this point, they were working empiricists, accepting plain and obvious hard evidence. Thomas was not there for this occasion, but when they all told him that they had seen the Lord, supported by others who were not

among the Apostolic band, he too rejected their testimony as being entirely *unlikely*. In his case, unlikelihood as he considered it – improbability according to his reckoning – indicated that their claims were false. What could have set his mind and heart so much against the likelihood of Christ's resurrection when confronted by so much testimony? For this we must turn to the Synoptic Gospel accounts of the Resurrection. St Luke, for instance, tells us that our Lord said to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus that they were "*foolish and slow in heart to believe*" (24:25). St Mark tells us (16:14) that our Lord upbraided them for their "*unbelief and hardness of heart*" in not believing. It was their, and Thomas's, slowness and hardness of *heart*.

Let us ask for the help of God to ensure that our minds and hearts are open to all that God has done, giving us the certitude that is faith. Thomas, though slow and hard of heart before the testimony of the witnesses, was wonderfully prompt in giving a magnificent profession of faith when he saw our Lord. He confessed before Jesus and before the others that he, Jesus, was his Lord and his God. Let us

pray for the faith to do this, by word, deed and general example, before the world of our everyday life.

Second reflection: (John 20: 24-29)

Living by Sight One of the distinctive features of the modern era – the West for the last few centuries – is the progressive denial of the Supernatural, of anything which cannot be verified or experienced empirically. That which is real is that which can be sensed. All else is ephemeral and unreal. Such is the modern secular tendency. Now of course, to consider that only the Natural is real is an assumption. It itself cannot be proved empirically. Further, it flies in the face of the wider voice of mankind and mankind's religions. However, the fact is that it characterises our culture and we ourselves, as children of our culture, can be progressively affected by it. Our Lord says to Thomas that the one who without seeing believes is, and will be, blessed (John 20:24-29). So, if we are to receive the blessings our Lord promises we are to live by faith, and not primarily (let alone exclusively) by sight. The danger is that to a greater or lesser extent we who believe

and who have the gift of faith will prefer to live by sight and treasure the blessings of this world rather than those promised by our Lord.

Let us then guard our faith and be alert to the especially modern temptation to live by sight.



Memorial of St Mary Magdalene C-2 (July 22)

Saint Mary Magdalene. (July 22) She was one of Christ's disciples and is described as one freed by our Lord of seven devils. She was one of his few disciples present at his death and burial. On the morning of his resurrection she went to his tomb and found it empty, and remaining behind was the first of those recorded in the Gospel of St John to whom the risen redeemer appeared. He asked her to announce his resurrection to the apostles. Devotion to her spread throughout the Western Church especially in the twelfth century.

Entrance Antiphon John 20:17 The Lord said to Mary Magdalene: Go to my brothers and tell them: I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

Collect O God, whose Only Begotten Son entrusted Mary Magdalene before all others with announcing the great joy of the Resurrection, grant, we pray, that through her intercession and example we may proclaim the living Christ and come to see him reigning in your

glory. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Song of Songs 3:1-4; Psalm 62; John 20:1-2, 11-18.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him! But Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. They asked her, Woman, why are you weeping? They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put him. At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. Woman, he said, why are you weeping? Who is it you are looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him. Jesus

said to her, Mary. She turned towards him and cried out in Hebrew, Rabboni! (which means Teacher). Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: I have seen the Lord! And she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-2, 11-18)

Divine Choice One of the fascinating features of salvation history is the recurrence of special *divine choice*. Of course, the presence of the conscience in man, with its command to do what is good and avoid what is evil, constitutes a call directed to each person. It is a call coming from the Creator and is personal to each. I am *called*, by the *command* of conscience, to be good by doing what is good. The “voice” of conscience is felt, when reflected upon, to be the echo of the “voice” of the Creator, and in that voice there is expressed a *choice* of the individual by the Creator to do the good. This is quite apart from the more fundamental “choice” of the individual by the Creator in

bringing that person into being. I am *chosen* by the Creator to exist, and I am chosen by him to do what is good. While being the expression of the divine will and therefore a command, it is a high privilege for each and a precious gift. This divine choice is particular to all persons of all times and places conferring on all men and women of history a profound individual dignity. As well as this, of course, it is plain that the Creator has endowed with special gifts, temperaments and circumstances numerous individuals and even societies, and this for special service in the world. Men such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle possessed their philosophical talents for the benefit of mankind. A case could be made for saying that even certain societies and nations had their gifts for the benefit of mankind. The *Pax Romana* of the Mediterranean region (from Britain and Gaul to the Middle East) benefitted countless persons – and this was due to the administrative gifts and military prowess of classical Rome. So the divine choice can be discerned in ordinary human history, once the fact of the Creator and Ruler of all is accepted. But God has exercised this pattern of special choice most especially in the realm of *salvation* history. Abraham was

an obscure family man in Mesopotamia who moved to Haran with his family when “out of the blue” he was chosen by God with an enormously important mission. He was to be the father of the faith of countless persons and the ancestor of the Messiah. Abraham is an archetype of those who are the object of divine choice in salvation history. This choice of Abraham also involved the divine choice of a people, and throughout its history, prior to the appearance of the Messiah, there were divine choices of individual kings, priests and prophets.

The fact of this is plain enough, but the intriguing thing is, why *him* or *her*, and why *this* people and *not another*? Of course, we do not know. When Jesus began his public ministry, he immediately set about calling to himself his disciples. He *gathered* and *attracted* disciples, but many he specifically *chose* and *called*. We read in the Gospel that he called from among his disciples twelve to be his special companions and collaborators in his mission. These he named *Apostles*. Why did he choose *them*, those ones in particular? Why did he choose Judas

from among his disciples to be one of the Twelve, when Judas would turn out so badly? Why did he not select instead the one who would eventually (after the Ascension) succeed Judas, Matthias? – for we read in *The Acts of the Apostles* that Matthias was indeed a follower of Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry. We do not know. It was the *divine choice*. All this brings us to our Gospel passage today (John 20:1-2, 11-18), which recounts the discovery by Mary of the empty tomb and subsequently of her meeting with the risen Jesus. She had this inestimable privilege of gazing on the empty tomb with the stone rolled to the side, of telling the disciples that the tomb was empty, and then of meeting Jesus himself. Jesus *chose* to meet her, before almost all others. We may presume that he met and spoke to his mother first even though this is not recorded. Did the mother of Jesus *ever* tell others about her meeting with her risen Son? We do not know. It may have been too precious, too high and great an occasion, for her ever to have spoken of it. That aside, we do know that our Lord *chose* to speak to Mary Magdalene at the tomb and to give her this incalculable joy of seeing and speaking with the risen Saviour after having seen him die an

atrocious death on the cross and being buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea afterwards. How Mary must have felt loved and chosen by our Lord – and he immediately gave her a mission. It was to announce to the disciples, including to the Eleven, that he had risen from the dead. Let us note that Mary of Magdala was not, thereby, designated as the one who loved Jesus the most, nor as being charged with the most important work of Christ, nor as being the greatest of his disciples. No – she was simply *chosen* by Christ for his own loving and good purposes.

Each one of us is the object of the divine choice. We are this by our very creation, and this choice can be said to be operative continually in the voice of our daily conscience. But above and beyond that, we are the object of God's choice in Christ. St Paul writes that before the world began God chose us in Christ to be holy and full of love in his sight. This eternal choice is confirmed in our Baptism, and confirmed by us in our acceptance of this calling to live in Christ all our days. Further, we have our particular path to follow and this too is the

expression of God's choice of us. It may be a humble path in the eyes of others, and the next person, perhaps once our very school classmate, has his high and prominent path that wins the acclaim of society. No matter that God chose him to do what many consider very important, and me with my lesser talents to do what is obscure and out of the sight of the many. No matter at all. What matters is that we accept our calling as expressing God's loving choice, and then to live as best we can as his grateful and obedience children in Christ.



Feast of St James the Greater, Apostle (July 25)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 4:18, 21 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother mending their nets and he called them.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who consecrated the first fruits of your Apostles by the blood of Saint James, grant, we pray, that your Church may be strengthened by his confession of faith and constantly sustained by his protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St James the Apostle (July 25) This James is the brother of John the Evangelist. The two were called by Jesus as they worked with their father in a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had already called another pair of brothers from a similar occupation: Peter and Andrew. “James was one of the favoured three who had the privilege of witnessing the Transfiguration, the raising to life of the daughter of

Jairus and the agony in Gethsemani. After the Ascension we read in the Acts of the Apostles that “King Herod laid hands upon some members of the church to harm them. He had James, the brother of John, killed by the sword, and when he saw that this was pleasing to the Jews he proceeded to arrest Peter also” (Acts 12:1-3a). This James, sometimes called James the Greater, is not to be confused with the author of the Letter of James and the leader of the Jerusalem community.

Scripture today: 2 Corinthians 4:7-15; Psalm 126:1bc-6;

Matthew 20:20-28

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him. What is it you want? he asked. She said, Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom. You don't know what you are asking, Jesus said to them. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? We can, they answered. Jesus said to them, You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared

by my Father. When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:20-28)

Humble Service In her book, *Picking Up: On the Streets and Behind the Trucks with the Sanitation Workers of New York City* (2013), anthropologist Robin Nagle looks at the work of clearing all the garbage generated by America's largest city -- 11,000 tons from households each day on average. New Yorkers don't give it much attention. They leave their trash on the curb or drop it in a litter basket, and promptly forget about it. Nagle introduces us to the men and women of New York City's Department of Sanitation and shows how this small army of uniformed workers is the most important labour

force on the streets. As a matter of fact, for the purposes of her investigation she joined this force herself. Her book chronicles New York City's four-hundred-year struggle with trash, and traces the city's waste-management efforts from a time when filth overwhelmed the streets to the far more rigorous practices of today. She accompanied crews on their routes, questioned supervisors and commissioners, and listened to story after story about blizzards, hazardous wastes, and the insults of everyday New Yorkers. The book would help anyone see the value of the obscure work of the garbage man and how the whole vast city depends on his daily service. What would happen if the city was without its garbage clearers for one month? The city would be in chaos. What would happen if a very well paid professor of ancient Syriac were not to be available for a year? Little difference would be made by his absence in the broad scheme of things, and yet the garbage man has little of the professor's status. It reminds one of the story told by, I think, St Josemaria Escriva about the donkey that went round and round the stone all day every day keeping the stone revolving. That donkey kept the village in running water. Without the donkey's

constant “work”, the village would be in real difficulty. The “service” of that dumb donkey was essential for the village. This highlights the glory of service in the life of man, and how it is that no true service does not have its grandeur. The university professor of Syriac is doing grand work if his work is pursued as a true service, and not just a means of being served and glorified. The garbage man is doing superb work if his work is pursued as a true service, and a moment’s thought by anyone ought make it plain that his work is utterly essential, and worthy of all respect, protection and due compensation.

The same thing is to be said of so many spheres of humble work. The worker on the roads – where would a modern city be were it not for the indispensable work of the road-worker? The list of such persons and their service could go on and on. The constant tendency is to consider such persons and their service as the last in importance. But a little careful thought ought convince anyone that such service is not the last. On the contrary, it can be the greatest in value for the greatest number, and this obvious fact helps us to see things from God’s

perspective. He sees things and persons as they truly are, and a so-called high position is as nothing in his sight. Kings can render an immense service, of course. King Louis IX of France (1214-1270), an almost exact contemporary of St Thomas Aquinas and St Bonaventure, was perhaps the dominant figure in 13th century Europe. He had as his aim to ensure that all persons in his kingdom got to heaven. He was a remarkable Catholic king, and with good reason was canonized by the Church. The essential thing for all is to serve, and all men have an instinctive admiration for those who serve well and for the right reason. All this introduces to us our Lord's words in today's Gospel passage (Matthew 20:20-28). It opens with the mother of two of our Lord's main disciples coming to him with her sons to ask of him the favour of placing them at his right and left in his glory. They wanted a special position – and this caused indignation among the other disciples, as they were seen to be getting an unfair advantage. Our Lord in response pointed out a few basic things. It is only through suffering that glory would be attained – they had to drink the cup which he was to drink. Their love for him assured him that they would drink it, and he

confirmed it – “You will indeed drink from my cup”. But the essential thing he emphasised was service, humble service after the manner, even, of a slave. *Jesus called them together and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

Our Lord himself came to serve unto death. He is our model. What then is the purpose of life? The purpose of life is to serve – and for this we have our wonderful exemplar. Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God said that *the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.* Before he ascended into heaven he gave his disciples a mission which related to the whole world, to every man and woman of every time and place. It was to make disciples of all the nations. So all men and women are called by God to take Jesus Christ as their Lord and

Master. And what example does he give to all of us? It is to serve humbly, with Christ's interests as our guide.



Memorial of Saint Joachim and Saint Anne (July 26)

Joachim and Ann are named as Mary's parents in a late second century tradition. Churches dedicated to Saint Ann are found in Jerusalem and Constantinople from the middle of the sixth Century. The feast of Saint Ann was kept in Rome by the eighth century, that of Saint Joachim from the fifteenth century. The feast honours the parents of the Virgin Mary and grandparents of the Lord.

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sirach 44:1-25 Let us praise Joachim and Anne, to whom, in their generation, the Lord gave him who was a blessing for all the nations.

Collect O Lord, God of our Fathers, who bestowed on Saints Joachim and Anne this grace, that of them should be born the Mother of your incarnate Son, grant, through the prayers of both, that we may attain the salvation you have promised to your people.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 2:1-3.7-8.12-13; Ps. 35; Matthew 13:10-17

The disciples came to Jesus and asked, Why do you speak to the people in parables? He replied, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matthew 13:10-17)

Holiness The mere fact that the Church's Liturgical Year officially celebrates the parents of Mary the mother of Christ as *saints* establishes that in fact they *were* saints. It is yet another indicator of the power and the role of the Church's Tradition. I am not aware of any saint featuring in the Old Testament who is celebrated formally in the Church's Year – none of the Patriarchs, nor Moses, nor any of the Prophets or holy kings such as David. The nearest (indirectly), I suppose, might be John the Baptist, a great prophet of the coming Messiah, yet a contemporary and witness to Christ. But there are *Joachim and Anne*, whose names do not appear in the Old Testament texts, but come to us from sources well after Jesus Christ. They lived two generations before Christ, and were probably contemporaries of Simeon and Anna, and Elizabeth and Zechariah in Luke's infancy account. It is to be noted that while Simeon, Anna, Zechariah and Elizabeth feature in Luke's Gospel, they are not celebrated in the Church's Year as saints – which of course does *not* mean that they were not saints. But Joachim and Anne, who do not feature anywhere in the entire Bible, have their day in the Church's Liturgical Year. The details of their lives are buried in obscurity and

are the subject of what is mainly speculation on the basis of unreliable sources. Yet the parents of Mary, the grandparents of Jesus Christ were *saints* before God – this we know from the fact that by the Church’s decision their day is celebrated on July 26. Further, there is this. The Church chooses to employ the Gospel text above for their celebration. Our Lord in these words speaks of the Old Testament era, the era of divinely-guided preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Notice what he says about this whole period: *For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it* (Matthew 13:17). So during the history of God’s chosen people following their founding, many prophets and righteous men longed to see the fulfilment of the divine promises. There were many holy persons during this period of salvation history. Let us remember this and revere the Old Testament accordingly. It was a time of holiness, despite the infidelity of so many. It reminds us that the Old Testament tells of holiness and sin.

Our Lord's words tell us more about this point. Speaking to his disciples who gazed on him and heard his words, he says, *blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear*. Now, prior to this he spoke of the *people* and the reason for his addressing them in parables. *Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'* Our Lord sees what is in the heart, and he says that the blindness and lack of understanding of the people was due to a hardness of heart. So these are the issues, hearts that have become hard through sin which brings on blindness, and the blessedness of sight and hearing because of fidelity to God. Inasmuch as the Church uses this text for Joachim and Anne's day, our Lord's words tell us about the dominant feature of the holiness of his grandparents. But there is a further point from our

Lord's words. The lives of Joachim and Anne were oriented towards the coming of the Messiah. They lived in expectation of this and so lived as to be found worthy of his arrival. *Many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.* Joachim and Anne were among them, as was, say, Simeon (in Luke's infancy narrative) who longed to see the Messiah and had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death till he did. Joachim and Anne were of his ilk and company, little suspecting that their daughter, so beautiful in soul, would be the very mother of the Messiah. So then, Joachim and Anne remind us both of the holiness of the Old Testament and of its end and purpose. Its purpose was to long for the Messiah and to prepare worthily for his coming. Let us read the Old Testament in the way our Lord would have us read it, seeing therein paradigm after paradigm of holiness and sin, and further, the divine preparation for and prefiguring of himself.

Joachim and Anne, obscure no-bodies in the sight of the majority, were representative instances of all this. Obscure and hidden

as they were, they were chosen by God for a high purpose, to be the parents of the Virgin Mary and grandparents of the incarnate Son of God, our Saviour. They did not shine out and gain acclaim. They did not do especially noteworthy deeds. They stand in the company of Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon and the prophetess Anna. Their holiness glowed brightly before God, but did not make it into the annals of recorded history – not even into the Bible. That contains a great lesson for us all. Let us be content with the lot to which God has assigned us in virtue of our talents, circumstances and history, each day humbly resolving to do his will faithfully and with love.



Memorial of St Martha (July 29)

Saint Martha. (July 29) Our Lord Jesus Christ loved Martha, Mary and their brother Lazarus, and they took loving care of him in his visits to them. Martha received the Lord into her home and provided for his needs with great care. On one such visit Martha freely complained to our Lord for not telling her sister to help her with the serving. At her request the Lord returned and raised her brother from the dead.

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Lk 10:38 Jesus entered a village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, whose Son was pleased to be welcomed in Saint Martha's house as a guest, grant, we pray, that through her intercession, serving Christ faithfully in our brothers and sisters, we may merit to be received by you in the halls of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 7:1-11; Psalm 84:3,4,5-6a and 8a,11;

John 11:19-27 or Luke 10:38-42

Many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask. Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? Yes, Lord, she told him, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world. (John 11:19-27)

The Afterlife I once somehow picked up, without checking the point, that it was a Roman author who coined the phrase (or perhaps it was a Roman popular saying), “*Let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.*” It expressed abandon to the pleasures of this life, for soon life

would be over – meaning, *extinct*. It assumed the absence both of a coming Judgment and of any significant Afterlife. I have heard it suggested that the phrase comes from the Greek writer Epicurus (3rd Century BC). As a matter of fact this famous statement comes from the *Bible* – the prophet Isaiah, no less, who lived well before Epicurus. He coined the phrase as expressing the attitudes of those who live as if all there is to live for is wilful self-indulgence. For them there will be God’s drastic judgment and a divine punishment for their iniquity (Isaiah 22: 13-14). In the Book of Ecclesiastes (the author of which may have been a contemporary of Epicurus) we read that “*man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and enjoy himself, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of life which God gives him under the sun*” (8:15). Perhaps the author is inviting us not to be rushing through life trying *simply* to gain wealth, power, status or whatever. Rather, let us savour loving and being loved and enjoying the legitimate pleasures that come our way such as the beauty of the world and human communication. Be that as it may, the purpose of my mentioning this is to raise the sombre question of the end of this life

and its aftermath – what happens then? Due to the influence of Christianity, vast numbers across the world for many centuries have assumed the Afterlife, and have assumed that following death all will be well with them. This is because God is kind and good. This optimism is the received attitude, and it would appear odd to many to hear of a person who thinks that one becomes extinct at death. But of course, it is one thing to have the assumption that a pleasant Afterlife (called Heaven) follows this life. It is a further thing to think carefully about this and to draw the proper conclusions. The pleasant Afterlife, according to Revealed Teaching, follows on God’s Judgment – and it is for those found by him to be worthy. This part of it – which is to say the fact of a God who will judge us – is forgotten. Many “believe” but no “works” follow.

Even the consistent atheist can fail to draw obvious conclusions. I remember watching a television interview with the prominent Australian author and public intellectual, Donald Horne (author of *The Lucky Country*, 1964). As I recall, he had declared

himself to be an atheist or at least an agnostic. During the interview he was asked what he thought would happen after death. He said that he had always thought it wise to content oneself with dealing with immediate issues and not to look too far ahead. So he declined to discuss the Afterlife – forgetting that the Afterlife might come at any moment. Pascal proposed to the non-believer that it would be prudent to make the wager that there is a God who will judge us and to live accordingly. Views on the Afterlife have abounded. Theists generally believe some type of Afterlife awaits people when they die. Members of some non-theistic religions believe in an Afterlife of some kind, but without reference to a deity. The Sadducees generally believed that there was a God but no Afterlife, for they saw no evidence of this teaching in the Torah. Indigenous religions have tenets of enormous variety. Hunter-gatherer societies such as the African Hazda have no particular belief in an Afterlife. Ancestor cults are found throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. In some societies like the Mende, multiple beliefs coexist. The Afterlife played an important role in ancient Egyptian religion. When the body died, parts of its soul would go to the

Kingdom of the Dead. Arriving at one's reward in the Afterlife required a sin-free heart and the ability to recite the spells and formulae of the Book of the Dead. All this is to say that across the ages little certainty was available regarding the great question of life – the aftermath of death. It was the dark Unknown, and yet it was and is unavoidable for all. Strangely, in the modern secular society of the West and those parts of the world influenced by the West, great numbers simply ignore the issue. They do not ignore death (for they make their wills and prepare their funerals) but they ignore what will happen after death. This, of course, is the greatest foolishness because at least it is *possible* that life will continue in some form, and in view of the universality in society of laws and sanctions of reward and punishment, it is also *possible* that there will be a Judgment following death. With that Judgment an eternity could be decided. Not to make Pascal's wager is a tragic foolishness.

St Paul tells us that sin entered the world and because of this death entered the world and spread to all. This is because all are under

the power of sin. This is basically a restating of the Genesis account of the entry of sin in the world and its results. The divine answer was to send the Son of God, the Author of life, to become one of us and to redeem us from sin and death. His rising to life heralded our own, provided we live in obedient union with him by faith and the Sacraments. As he said to Martha, *He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?* The Afterlife is not now a dark Unknown. It is all light and that light is Christ. But we must place our faith in him and live according to his word, ever repenting, ever beginning again. With good reason the famous Father Patrick Peyton once said that he was looking forward to death, because this would mean meeting and being with Jesus Christ – which is exactly what St Paul wrote.



Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord (August 6)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 17:5 In a resplendent cloud the Holy Spirit appeared. The Father's voice was heard: This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.

Collect O God, who in the glorious Transfiguration of your Only Begotten Son confirmed the mysteries of faith by the witness of the Fathers and wonderfully prefigured our full adoption to sonship, grant, we pray, to your servants, that, listening to the voice of your beloved Son, we may merit to become co-heirs with him. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Transfiguration This feast became widespread in the West in the eleventh century and was introduced into the Roman calendar in 1457 to commemorate Christendom's victory over Islam in Belgrade in 1456. Before that, the Transfiguration of the Lord was already celebrated in the Syrian, Byzantine, and Coptic rites. The Transfiguration prefigures the glory of the Lord as God, foretells his

ascension into heaven, and anticipates the glory of heaven, where we shall see God face to face. Through grace, we already share in the divine promise of eternal life.

Scripture today: Daniel 7:9-10.13-14; Psalm 96;

2 Peter 1:16-19; Luke 9:28-36

About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters- one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. (He did not know what he was saying.) While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid

as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him. When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves, and told no one at that time what they had seen. (Luke 9: 28-36)

Christ Transfigured There is no occasion in the Old Testament which is the direct predecessor of the Transfiguration of Christ. No other prophet, priest or king is portrayed as having had this experience of being manifested in glory – perhaps Moses, descending from Sinai with his face radiant may be seen as similar. This alone ought indicate the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. He was transfigured in splendour, and two of the greatest saints of the Old Testament appeared to him, conversing with him about his mission. Moreover, the Father spoke. The nearest thing to this is Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai, after which (as already said) he descended with his face aglow. He veiled his face as a result. The Transfiguration was a stunning occurrence, and the inspired author of the Second Letter of St

Peter refers to it (2 Peter 1: 16-19). The author writes that "*we had been eye-witnesses of his exaltation.*" It is to be remembered that while the Apostles and disciples saw our Lord risen from the dead on various occasions, they did not see him then showing forth a dazzling, visual glory. Had they seen him thus when risen, it may have cast doubts in their minds that they were seeing Christ truly in the flesh. They may have thought he was a heavenly being – a mighty spirit, even. As it was, initially they thought they were seeing a ghost. But within a minute he showed them that it was the same Jesus back with them in the flesh. When with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, Jesus was not recognized by them, so ordinary did he seem. But at the Transfiguration Peter and John and James saw him in dazzling glory. As this Second Letter of Peter describes the event, the voice of God the Father was especially notable. They heard God the Father himself, pointing to Jesus as his Son. This was the only time, before or after his Resurrection, that Jesus Christ was shown in shining, even overwhelming, glory. It occurred shortly before his degrading death. The three who witnessed it never forgot it, and it passed from

them into the three Synoptic Gospels. There are slight differences in the accounts, so let us consider them.

Our passage today is from St Luke. He tells us that it was in order to pray that our Lord went up the mountain with his three disciples, and it was during his prayer that the Transfiguration occurred. Christ at prayer! Imagine it! He would have been wholly absorbed in the Person of his heavenly Father, each absorbed in the other. *I am in the Father and the Father is in me*, he would tell his disciples. Wholly united to the Father in prayer, the divine glory became manifested in him. We can imagine the commencement of the glory, the glow filling the figure of our Lord and then the brilliance of his divinity outshining all. The Son of God was being manifested. Its occasion, Luke tells us, was his prayer – this detail is missing in both Matthew's and Mark's accounts. They simply say that Christ took them up the mountain where they were alone. We notice that Luke includes the detail that both Moses and Elijah were in splendour too – in Matthew and in Mark, it is simply said that Moses and Elijah appeared

conversing with him. Their omission of the glory of Moses and Elijah may suggest that the glory of Christ far outshone theirs. Even Luke, who has himself just spoken of the glory of Moses and Elijah, says that the three Apostles "*saw his glory and the two men standing with him,*" a way of putting it that reduces mention of their glory. Nevertheless, Luke does note the glory of Moses and Elijah. Perhaps their glory was a manifestation of the happiness of those who had died in God – God who long before had said to Moses at the Burning Bush that he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Perhaps it also indicated the glory that was *coming* for all those holy souls of the past who were still awaiting the Exodus in Jerusalem to be accomplished by the Messiah. This brings us to a further detail in Luke that is not mentioned in the other accounts. He tells us what Moses and Elijah were discussing with Jesus: "*They spoke about his departure, which he was about to achieve at Jerusalem.*" There was a new Exodus coming, and a new Promised Land. The Kingdom was coming in glory. What all four accounts emphasise is the glory of Jesus that was revealed, and the simultaneous revelation by the Father that here was his own Son. To

him, the Father declared, all were to listen. Nothing equal to this had ever happened before.

From all eternity Christ had enjoyed the glory that was his as the eternal Son of the Father. He had set this glory aside and had become as we men are, and humbler still, even to death on the cross. But God would raise him up and he would reclaim his glory, but now as man too. In him man – each of us – has a destiny of glory. In the Transfiguration we are given a glimpse of the glory that we shall share in if we follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Let us so live that God will be honoured and glorified. If we so live, we too will share in glory.

Second reflection: Luke 9: 28-36

The Transfiguration of Our Lord In this dramatic event of our Lord's public life, witnessed only by the three who would be the future 'pillars' (as said St Paul) of the infant Church, our Lord is manifested by the Father in his glory. He is the culmination and fulfilment of the Old Testament (represented by Moses and Elijah), and the Son of God to

whom all mankind must listen. In our mind and heart let the Person of Jesus stand forth before all else in creation. Nothing is to be compared with the Person of Jesus, and nothing is to take his place in our mind and heart.

Let us resolve to listen to Jesus before all else and to measure all else according to his teaching. That teaching comes to us in the teaching of the Church his body, represented by the three Apostles present at the great event. The Church is Christ made present in our day, the oracle and prophet of God. To her we ought listen as to Christ.



St Mary of the Cross MacKillop (August 8 in Australia)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 25:34, 36, 40 Come, you blessed of my Father, says the Lord: I was sick, and you visited me. Amen, I say to you: whatever you did for one of the least of my brethren, you did it for me.

Collect O God, source of all goodness, who have shown us in Saint Mary a woman of faith living by the power of the Cross, teach us, we pray, by her example to live the gospel in changing times and to respect and defend the human dignity of all in our land. Through our Lord.

St Mary MacKillop (1842 - 1909) (Australia) On January 15, 1842 Mary MacKillop was born of Scottish parents, Alexander MacKillop and Flora MacDonald in Fitzroy, Victoria. This was less than seven years after Faulkner sailed up the Yarra, when Elizabeth Street was a deep gully and Lonsdale Street was still virgin bush. A plaque in the footpath now marks the place of her birth in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy. Mary, the eldest of eight children, was well educated by her

father who spent some years studying for the priesthood in Rome but through ill health had returned to his native Scotland until 1835 when he migrated to Australia with his parents. Unfortunately, he lacked financial awareness, so the family was often without a home of their own, depending on friends and relatives and frequently separated from one another. From the age of sixteen, Mary earned her living and greatly supported her family, as a governess, as a clerk for Sands and Kenny (now Sands and MacDougall), and as a teacher at the Portland school. While acting as a governess to her uncle's children at Penola, Mary met Father Julian Tenison Woods who, with a parish of 22,000 square miles/56,000 square kilometres, needed help in the religious education of children in the outback. At the time Mary's family depended on her income so she was not free to follow her dream. However, in 1866, greatly inspired and encouraged by Father Woods, Mary opened the first Saint Joseph's School in a disused stable in Penola. Young women came to join Mary, and so the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph was begun. In 1867, Mary was asked by Bishop Shiel to come to Adelaide to start a school. From there, the

Sisters spread, in groups to small outback settlements and large cities around Australia, New Zealand, and now in Peru, Brazil and refugee camps of Uganda and Thailand. Mary and these early Sisters, together with other Religious Orders and Lay Teachers of the time, had a profound influence on the forming of Catholic Education as we have come to know and experience it today. She also opened Orphanages, Providences to care for the homeless and destitute both young and old, and Refuges for ex-prisoners and ex-prostitutes who wished to make a fresh start in life. Throughout her life, Mary met with opposition from people outside the Church and even from some of those within it. In the most difficult of times she consistently refused to attack those who wrongly accused her and undermined her work, but continued in the way she believed God was calling her and was always ready to forgive those who wronged her. Throughout her life Mary suffered ill health. She died on August 8, 1909 in the convent in Mount Street, North Sydney where her tomb is now enshrined. This great Australian woman inspired great dedication to God's work in the then new colonies. In today's world, she stands as an example of great courage

and trust in her living out of God's loving and compassionate care of those in need.

Scripture today: Judith 8:11-17,28-31; Colossians 3:12-17;

Matthew 6:25-34

Jesus said, Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the

pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:25-34)

MacKillop The study of history is a source of unending fascination. Some have seen history as primarily the working out of laws – the laws of history. Hegel and Marx understood history in terms of the law of struggle and they thought they had identified a pattern in this struggle. Others see history as primarily driven by individuals. What individuals choose to do is the determining factor in history. Of course, there are a multitude of factors that shape the course of mankind, and there is surely no doubt that individuals, considered in the mass and considered in terms of the leaders of the mass, are of decisive importance. What would have happened about the spread of Greek civilization were it not for Alexander? At the same time, there is a mighty factor transcending this world which is fundamental to its

course. I refer to divine Providence, the action in history of God the Creator and Redeemer. The Sacred Scriptures teach and illustrate that amid the rise and fall of the fortunes and course of the world, God is attaining his end. At the beginning, man fell and was estranged from his Creator. At the end, through the work of Christ, God will be all in all. God is almighty and his might shows itself in his mercy. Now, a signal display of the might of God in history is the story of sanctity – the lives of the saints. The greatest Saint of all is Jesus Christ, of course, and he – oh wonder! – was and is God made man. He is the face of God, and in him we see that God is holy, mighty, compassionate, merciful. But there have been numerous saints since him, all lovers of Jesus Christ. The might of God is shown in the sanctity of these numerous individuals. Their sanctity is the work of his grace, with which they have fully co-operated. An example is afforded us in the life of Mary MacKillop, early Australian. Born in Melbourne a mere seven years after its founding by settlers from Van Dieman's Land, Mary MacKillop was a child of five when the settlement was

declared a city by Queen Victoria. Her family was pious and good, and God chose her to be the special work of his grace.

The child was privileged, it seems, to have been visited by the Virgin Mary and assured that she had been marked from the beginning as her child (Gardiner, 29-30). There is no need to trace the course of her life, for it is well known. But one event may be considered, the terrible mistake of her excommunication by the bishop of Adelaide. Dr Sheil, in mitre and cape, said he had to take this step because of Mary's disobedience and rebellion. He himself was acting in total disregard for the requirements of canon law. No proofs were cited. One of the sisters in the chapel broke down, distraught. Later, Bishop Goold commented from Melbourne, "Poor Dr Sheil, he must labour under mental disease." But what is remarkable, and what shows the power of grace in forging sanctity, was Mary's response. Mary's account of the experience is as follows: *"I seemed not to realize the presence of the Bishop and priests; I know I did not see them; but I felt, oh, such a love for their office, a love, a sort of reverence for the very sentence which I*

then knew was being in full force passed upon me. I do not know how to describe the feeling, but I was intensely happy and felt nearer to God than I ever felt before. The sensation of the calm beautiful presence of God I shall never forget” (Gardiner, 105). The striking thing about this event was the composure, peace of soul and happiness in God which Mary MacKillop experienced and displayed throughout. It was one of numerous instances of the power of divine grace at work in her soul. Her life was marked by the Cross – her name in religion was Mary of the Cross. The Cross was her means of fruitfulness and in carrying the Cross she attained joy in this life, and eternal happiness in the next. The power of God was at work in her life because she embraced the Cross for love of Jesus Christ, the Cross that is inherent in doing the divine will. When we think of a saint such as Mary MacKillop, we ought think in the first instance of the power of God attaining its end, which is the sanctification of man. This is the will of God, your sanctification, St Paul writes. God’s mighty power in history is shown especially in the life of the saint.

What to do, then? Firstly, we must have a great desire for personal sanctity, which is to say, for union with God in Jesus Christ. We must want to live and die in Jesus. We must want to follow him closely, for love of him. For love of him, we must want to imitate him in the deepest recesses of our heart and soul. This cannot be done without the active and constant aid of divine grace. It is God's work, and our role is to co-operate generously every day. Let us ask St Mary MacKillop to intercede for us before the throne of God, that we, each of us, will co-operate generously with the powerful and beautiful plan of God in our regard, to ensure that his will in us is done.



Feast of St Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr (August 10)

Entrance Antiphon This is the blessed Lawrence, who gave himself up for the treasure of the Church: for this he earned the suffering of martyrdom to ascend with joy to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Collect O God, giver of that ardor of love for you by which Saint Lawrence was outstandingly faithful in service and glorious in martyrdom, grant that we may love what he loved and put into practice what he taught. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Saint Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr (August 10) Saint Lawrence was one of seven deacons who were in charge of giving help to the poor and the needy. When a persecution broke out, Pope St. Sixtus was condemned to death. As he was led to execution, Lawrence followed him weeping, "Father, where are you going without your deacon?" he said. "I am not leaving you, my son," answered the Pope. "in three

days you will follow me.” Full of joy, Lawrence gave to the poor the rest of the money he had on hand and even sold expensive vessels to have more to give away. The Prefect of Rome, a greedy pagan, thought the Church had a great fortune hidden away. So he ordered Lawrence to bring the Church's treasure to him. The Saint said he would, in three days. Then he went through the city and gathered together all the poor and sick people supported by the Church. When he showed them to the Prefect, he said: "This is the Church's treasure! In great anger, the Prefect condemned Lawrence to a slow, cruel death. The Saint was tied on top of an iron grill over a slow fire that roasted his flesh little by little, but Lawrence was burning with so much love of God that he almost did not feel the flames. In fact, God gave him so much strength and joy that he even joked. "Turn me over," he said to the judge. "I'm done on this side! And just before he died, he said, "It's cooked enough now.” Then he prayed that the city of Rome might be converted to Jesus and that the Catholic Faith might spread all over the world. After that, he went to receive the martyr's reward. Saint Lawrence's feast day is August 10th.

Scripture today: 2 Corinthians 9:6-10; Psalm 112:1-2, 5-6, 7-8, 9;
John 12:24-26

Jesus said to his disciples: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honour whoever serves me." (John 12:24-26)

Providence and Suffering It has been said that the Christianity of large numbers of people amounts to a respectful regard for the Bible and a form of belief in Providence. Well, setting aside the matter of how the Bible is viewed and read, let us consider the matter of Providence. When people think of "Providence" they think of the beneficent care of God. This belief in God's care, or in the care of nature as exercised (in some sense) by the gods or the Ultimate, has always been a fairly common feature of religion. The religious person

tends to think that the powers above care for him in some sense. The atheist does not think this, because for him there are no powers above, or if there are they have a minimal role. But Revealed Religion declares a magnificent and stupendous teaching on Providence. There is but one God, and he is almighty. All things, seen and unseen, are in his hand. Even though great numbers of persons whether angelic or human have rebelled against him, they cannot thwart the attainment of his ultimate goals. If the hallmark of the competent person is his capacity to attain his ends despite adverse circumstances, the Creator is supremely competent even if it involves for him a cost almost beyond imagining. He will attain his goal of being all in all who accept him. Let us take but one instance of this, to appreciate the wonder and scope of divine Providence. I refer to the creation of each individual. St Paul writes that from before the foundation of the world, each of us was chosen by God to be holy and blameless in his sight and full of love (Ephesians 1:4-5). So God's choice of each of us was made from eternity. Now, consider the incalculable number and range of circumstances which contribute to the appearance of any one item in

creation, including each of us. Each of us, for instance, depended on the chance meeting of our parents, on that of our grandparents and all our ancestors – to cite but one kind of seeming chance event which brought about the appearance of each human being. A multitude of other chance events also had their role. But they were not just "chances", because the Providence of God was at work in all of them. In and through them, God brought about the creation of each of us whom he had chosen and foreseen from all eternity.

While it may *seem* that things just happen – a chance meeting, a sudden unforeseen tragedy – there is no *mere* "chance" because God is God and not just another factor in the scheme of things. A person takes his holiday in Bali, and is killed by a terrorist explosion. It was very bad luck that he made the decision to go. But there is nothing that is outside the plan of God because God is the Creator of all. We cannot adequately understand the relation between human freedom, the physical laws of the world, and God's almighty power, but it is a doctrine of the Christian faith that God exercises his Providence over

all. This must be kept in view when thinking of the evil and suffering of the world. Why did it happen? Was not God there? If there is a God, why did he not stop this, or change that? We do not know. But he was there, and he is almighty, and he will attain his goal of drawing abundant good out of the terrible things that happen. There is a further mysterious twist to the evil that seems to go unchecked by God. It is that it is the plan of God that good will especially come from suffering, if borne in obedience. In his Providence, it is when the grain of wheat dies that it bears much fruit. *"Jesus said to his disciples: 'Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life'"* (John 12:24-26). Repeatedly our Lord said that he had to suffer many things, be rejected by those who mattered – the chief priests and the scribes – and be put to death. It was only in and through this evil that he would enter his glory, and open up the gates to glory for those who believed in him. This is surely the most striking instance of the mighty Providence of God. Whenever we think

of divine Providence or refer to it, we ought not just think of the care that God exercises in giving us the good things we need, but of his transformation of suffering into a path to glory. The horrible fact of suffering has become, by the provident care of God in sending his Son, a means of great and enduring fruit.

The supreme way to enter into the Providence of God and to be carried along to the end term of his guidance of history, is to remain united with Jesus Christ. No one can calculate the course of history because there are simply too many "chance" happenings involved. But we are safe if we remain with God because he is the Lord of all. We shall be safe with God if we take our stand with Christ and come after him as he proceeds along the way of obedient suffering. Saint Lawrence the martyr shows us the way. As our Lord says, *"Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honour whoever serves me."*

A Second Reflection (Aug. 10) Saint Lawrence (2 Cor. 9: 6-10)

Generosity There are many benefits and blessings that come to us from being generous. But let us notice one blessing that St Paul speaks of in the first reading for this feast of St Lawrence. God loves a cheerful giver, he says. He will reward such a giver by granting him all he needs, and still have something for all sorts of good works. Indeed, he will "*make the harvest of your good works a larger one*" (2 Cor. 9:10). Our time is given us in life to do good work for God, to fulfil the share allotted us in the work that God himself is doing. Christ referred in the Gospel of John to himself as working, and to the Father as working. Our dignity is to spend our time in life collaborating with God in God's own work. We do this by our own daily work. By giving our time generously to God, St Paul says, we shall receive the blessing, the grace, to be able *to do more good still*, to produce a harvest of good works.

Let us resolve to do all the good we can by our work in life. The key is to give generously to God and to others, confident that God will enable us to do even more good and even better work.



The Vigil of The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

(August 14)

Entrance Antiphon Glorious things are spoken of you, O Mary, who today were exalted above the choirs of Angels into eternal triumph with Christ.

Collect O God, who, looking on the lowliness of the Blessed Virgin Mary, raised her to this grace, that your Only Begotten Son was born of her according to the flesh and that she was crowned this day with surpassing glory, grant through her prayers, that, saved by the mystery of your redemption, we may merit to be exalted by you on high. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Assumption Into Heaven of the Virgin Mary (August 15) This feast has been celebrated in the liturgy of the Eastern rites since the sixth century, and in Rome since the seventh century. On November 1, 1950 Pope Pius XII defined the dogma of the Assumption. He

solemnly proclaimed that the belief that the Blessed Virgin was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven at the end of her life really forms part of the deposit of faith, received from the apostles. This feast confirms us in the theological virtue of hope, whereby we seek our sanctification and that of others in the midst of our ordinary duties. At the same time, we are encouraged to look toward our goal in heaven.

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 15:3-4, 15-16; 16:1-2; Psalm 131;
1 Corinthians 15:34-37; Luke 11:27-28

As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you. He replied, Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it. (Luke 11:27-28)

Blessed Mary There is a particularly rich source of inspired information about the mother of Jesus Christ to be found in the Gospel of St Luke. Of course, it is especially present in the Infancy narrative of that Gospel, and one of its episodes is the meeting between Mary and her kinswoman Elizabeth. At the implicit suggestion of the Angel

Gabriel, Mary had hastened to Elizabeth to assist her as she prepared for the coming arrival of her child, the Precursor. The child leapt in her womb at Mary's approach, for the Messiah was present in her womb. But what we may notice here is the response of Elizabeth – suddenly “filled with the Holy Spirit”. Elizabeth now spoke as a prophetess and in “a loud voice”. What she said came from God, and her words announced that Mary was *blessed among women*, for blessed was the fruit of her womb. Mary was the mother of her Lord. So this is the basic fact about Mary – she is the mother of Jesus, who is *the Lord*. This is a declaration of the Holy Spirit who filled Elizabeth and moved her to utter this praise of Mary. All honour to her, then! All who honour and follow Jesus Christ as the Lord ought honour Mary as his mother, for Elizabeth was fulsome in her praise of her – and this praise was inspired by God. Let this introduce the event of our Gospel passage today, which is also drawn from the Gospel of St Luke. We read that a woman in the crowd, gazing on the wonderful phenomenon that was the person and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, could not but proclaim how *blessed* was his mother. *Blessed* must be your *mother*,

you wonderful Man, for she gave birth to *you*! It was praise of Jesus Christ in the first instance, and because of *him*, the *mother* was acknowledged. This comes from an ordinary woman of the crowd, not one under divine inspiration as was Elizabeth. What this means is that *any* person who perceives the grandeur of Jesus Christ – *any* person in the “crowd” as it were – ought take his or her cue from this woman. The mother of Christ is to be praised by all as *blessed among women*. I remember reading of a remark by the Evangelical preacher, Billy Graham. He said that Protestants must rethink their attitudes to Mary. She is, after all, the *mother of the Saviour*! It is as plain as the day that if Jesus Christ has absolutely no peer among the sons of men because he is Son of God, how great must be his mother too.

But while Mary’s unique dignity derives from her being mother of the incarnate Son of God our Saviour, there is more to her dignity than simply this. Let us return to the inspired utterance of Elizabeth who proclaimed that Mary is *blessed among women*. She is indeed *blessed for being the mother of the Lord* – but then Elizabeth adds the

most significant point that her blessedness involves a great moral feature. She believed the word of the Lord. “*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord*” (Luke 1: 45). So a fundamental feature of the greatness and blessedness of Mary was her faith. It is this which Jesus Christ sought from all if they were to fulfil the real work of God – *to believe*, to believe in the One whom God had sent (John 6). This was Mary’s distinguishing characteristic, according to the prophetess Elizabeth who spoke under divine inspiration. She believed the word of the Lord. Let this take us back to our Gospel passage for today (Luke 11:27-28), which tells us of the proclamation of the ordinary woman from the crowd of those gazing on Jesus Christ as he preached the word. Blessed is your mother, she said, *for being your mother*. Ah! said Christ – *Blessed rather, those who hear the word of God and obey it!* It is this which our Lord especially loved in his all-holy mother. She responded totally *in obedience to the will of God* which she heard with faith. She both believed and she obeyed. It is this which rendered her so totally united to her Son, for to him (he tells us) it is above all obedience to the

will of God which makes of a person his brother, his sister and his mother. By way of aside, our Lord had many relatives, and it seems that a few of them were indeed very close to him *in their love for and obedience to God*. Jerome concluded that the *James* whom Paul referred to as "the brother of the Lord" (Gal.1:19), was James, *son of Alphaeus*, one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus, as well as James, the *son of Mary Cleophas* ("sister" of the mother of our Lord of whom St John makes mention). The point here is that he was a cousin of our Lord, but one who *heard* the word of God and strove to *obey* it as Christ's disciple. So he was truly a "brother" of the Lord in our Lord's sense.

The pre-eminent exemplar of all that we have been referring to is the mother of Jesus, whom the woman in the crowd extolled in today's Gospel passage. Let her be a type of the ordinary person of all ages, one not especially endowed with grace perhaps, but who could easily divine the greatness and blessedness of the mother of the Man before her. She was blessed because she bore the Saviour and Teacher

of the world. But Christ took her point to higher and more important levels. The mother of Jesus is great and blessed because of the utter holiness of her life. She was sinless in her hearing of the word of God and putting it into practice. From the first moment of her conception she, as it were, was saying to God – behold, I come to do your will, O God. In this she was but a reflection of her incarnate Son.



The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 15)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Rev 12: 1 A great sign appeared in heaven:
a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon beneath her feet, and on
her head a crown of twelve stars.

Or:

Let us all rejoice in the Lord, as we celebrate the feast day in honour of
the Virgin Mary, at whose Assumption the Angels rejoice and praise the
Son of God.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who assumed the Immaculate
Virgin Mary, the Mother of your Son, body and soul into heavenly
glory, grant, we pray, that, always attentive to the things that are above,
we may merit to be sharers of her glory. Through our Lord Jesus
Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy
Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 11:19, 12: 1-6.10; Psalm 44;

1 Corinthians 15:20-26; Luke 1:39-56

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished! And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me- holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are

proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. (Luke 1:39 56)

Mary and the Ordinary At times when we think of outstanding historical figures, or people who have achieved some prominence, we can drift into wishful hopes of some personal notoriety. Behind this there can lie the hidden assumption that life's value and meaning depend on *recognition by others*. Yet human life is filled with much that is ordinary. In the nature of the case, the *ordinary* life of the many, involving little prominence, must bring little praise from others. Such a life consists of a multitude of ordinary duties common to the many, duties constantly fulfilled in unnoticed ways day after day. Most people live unobserved beyond their own circle, and die with little recognized

trace after them. They are soon forgotten. There is little in their life's path that seems to them or to others to be in any way special, let alone spectacular. They seem to sink like a stone with scarcely a ripple. The temptation is to think that because it is ordinary, such a life is fruitless, inconsequential, and of little value to God or to the world. Now, the Church proposes for our celebration her who is now more glorious than any other creature, her who is the mother of God made man and of every disciple of Christ – the wondrous Mary! In Christ, she is the help of all Christians, and indeed of all mankind. All may call on her as their glorious queen-mother who by her intercession and example will help them attain a share in the glory won by Christ. Her own life consisted of a very ordinary and unspectacular round of family and village duties. She grew up relatively unknown and spent her years in Nazareth as a humble wife and mother, teaching the growing Jesus, cooking, cleaning, carrying the water from the well, attending the synagogue, doing everything that the average villager would have been doing. There is no evidence that she was *especially* noticed. There is no indication that she, among the village women, was a village

leader. Doubtless she was respected and admired. But she was not prominent, dominant, nor widely known, yet no other human person lived so holy a life.

In the midst of this ordinary life, Mary the mother of Christ never in the slightest way sinned in thought, word, or deed. She fulfilled God's will absolutely and with a perfect love for him. There were women in the Old Testament who were holy and whose path in life was much more prominent and notable. But the one who was most blessed of all women, indeed the greatest of human beings in holiness of soul, was given a path in life that on the face of it was very *ordinary*. Because of the way she lived this ordinary life, she was assumed body and soul to our common homeland. This surely reminds us that the path which God in his providence has given us to tread, no matter how ordinary, humble and repetitive, has great value in God's sight if in it we faithfully strive to do God's will. If we endeavour to fulfill as best as we can the humble and ordinary responsibilities he has given us in life, we shall share in our measure the glory that Mary our

mother now has. Today (August 15) we think of Mary the mother of Christ, at the end of her mortal life, being taken up body and soul into heaven in glory. Kept free of all stain of original sin at her conception, she remained full of grace throughout her life of faith and obedience. Never did the slightest stain of sin touch her soul. Thus death, which St Paul describes as the wages of sin, did not prevail over her. At the end of her mortal life she followed her divine Son who, having risen from the dead, ascended into heaven many years before. The thought of Mary, assumed body and soul glorious into heaven, should give us hope as we toil at our duties of every day. Our path is hers, and she shows us the way. By thinking of our Lady in glory we are able to regain a sense of the grandeur of ordinary life, for Mary's life was an ordinary and obscure one, but lived extraordinarily well. By living well our ordinary life we are living as true children of Mary, her children — remembering that our Lord said that we are to become like little children if we wish to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Let us day by day keep close to Mary now taken up body and soul in glory, asking her to help us by her prayers to be like her, who is the first and greatest of Christians. On the Cross, our Lord gave to her his beloved disciple for her to be his mother, and in doing this he gave each of us to her. She continued after that to live her seemingly ordinary life. We are her children. Let us follow her ordinary path to glory, thinking of the glory that awaits us when the ordinary path God has given us to tread has been completed.



The Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 22)

Entrance Antiphon Ps 45 (44):10 At your right stands the queen in robes of gold, finely arrayed.

Collect O God, who made the Mother of your Son to be our Mother and our Queen, graciously grant that, sustained by her intercession, we may attain in the heavenly Kingdom the glory promised to your children. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary Pius XII established this feast in 1954. But Mary's queenship has roots in Scripture. Mary is closely associated with Jesus: Her queenship is a share in Jesus' kingship. We can also recall that in the Old Testament the mother of the king has great influence in court. In the fourth century St. Ephrem called Mary "Lady" and "Queen" and Church fathers and doctors continued to use the title. In his encyclical To the Queen of Heaven,

Pius XII points out that Mary deserves the title because she is Mother of God, because she is closely associated as the New Eve with Jesus' redemptive work, because of her pre-eminent perfection and because of her intercessory power. "Let the entire body of the faithful pour forth persevering prayer to the Mother of God and Mother of men. Let them implore that she who aided the beginnings of the Church by her prayers may now, exalted as she is in heaven above all the saints and angels, intercede with her Son in the fellowship of all the saints." (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 69).

Scripture today: Isaiah 9:1-6; Psalm 112; Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Hail, you who are full of grace! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will

conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the House of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.’ ‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’ The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible for God.’ ‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘Let it be to me according to your word.’ Then the angel left her. (Luke 1: 26-38)

The Most High There are many things which recur so constantly in the life of man that they may be thought of as characteristically human. A man speaks – animals do not. He laughs – animals do not. He plans for the future, selecting among goals and not merely reacting to instinct – animals do not so plan. He is aware of external

things precisely as existing in their own right – animals are not aware of this. He makes judgments about the nature of things. And so on. The natural powers of animals can be remarkable, and elements of their awareness and instinct *approach* man's intelligence and power of choice, but they do not *meet* nor *equal* it. Well, one of the recurrent and most widespread features of human life and civilization is the presence of religion, which is to say the recognition of and recourse to higher unseen powers. These higher powers are generally represented in visible objects which can easily come to be regarded as the powers themselves. Thus do we have idol-worship. That aside, man turns to higher powers and understands there to be an invisible world peopled by them. The individual (and his society) is aware of his own vulnerability and very limited power, and he has the sense that there are powers above that have influence over the course of the world. So he turns to those powers and endeavours to influence them in his own favour by prayers, sacrifices and by other means. The point here is that God or the gods are perceived as having *power*, and by judicious behaviour man can obtain the advantage of this *higher power*. The

point here is that *power* is perceived as the foremost attribute of the deity. God is powerful, while man is dependent and vulnerable. This is man's instinct, and it is a source of religion. God is the *mighty* One, and therefore he is not to be offended. If one is pleasing in his sight by keeping his rules, his power will be a protection and one's salvation. One question immediately springing from this common perception of the deity is this: *how* powerful is the deity in question? To *what degree* is he powerful? – because it would seem that all sorts of factors circumscribe his power, such as the existence of *other* powers. The next question is, is the deity in question *good and moral*, or is he indifferent to morality? Many of the gods of the myths were not particularly moral and so could not be depended on.

On all these counts, revealed religion displays a special and even unique character. There is but *one* God to begin with, and all is in his hands. Indeed, he is not merely the arranger of the world, the organizer of its structure. He is its *creator* in a radical and total sense. At one point in Cardinal Newman's novel *Callista*, a pagan

states that it is the Christians who brought in the idea of a “Creator”. The God of revealed religion creates and sustains the entire arena of reality, visible and invisible, from absolutely nothing. All things, visible and invisible, are sustained constantly by him from nothing. Their entire existence is dependent on his constant wish. This is a remarkable doctrine, though attainable by human reason. So there is one God and he is the Creator of all. But there is this – and it brings us back to the matter of *power*, the feature of the deity which especially interests vulnerable man. God is not only powerful, but *almighty*. He is all-powerful, infinitely powerful, powerful in a sense beyond challenge by any rival. This, then, is the foremost feature of the God of revelation, that he is almighty. *Nothing is impossible to God*. God has revealed that he can do anything – but this too has a corollary. For while the gods of the myths and religions of man were not especially rational or moral, the true God is so. He is *holy and wise*, even if it is beyond man to understand his rational and holy ways. Almighty God is good and holy. Nothing is impossible to him, provided it accords with his holiness, his love and his

wisdom. That corollary having been stated, man has every reason in the world to turn to the true God with confidence, appealing for an exercise of his unlimited power, and this is because he is *all-merciful*. His love shows itself as *mercy* before human need. His power which has no limit shows itself in *mercy*. Nothing is impossible for God, and this is wonderfully good news for broken and vulnerable man, enmeshed in his misery of sin and death. This is the Good News of revealed religion and especially of Jesus Christ, that *almighty God is rich in mercy*. To believe this is an ongoing test of faith, but this test must be met with the aid of grace. We will tend not to believe this and to fail in faith. God wants us to believe the Good News of Jesus Christ that God is almighty, that his power is shown in his mercy, and that he is our loving Father.

All this brings us to our Gospel passage for today (Luke 1:26-38), in which the Angel says to Mary that *nothing is impossible to God*. Stupendous things have been done by God for us and for our salvation, not least his election of the humble virgin for so great and

high a dignity. She was predestined from all eternity to be the mother of the incarnate Son of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords. She has thus been made by him to be Queen of heaven and earth. She is our mother and our Queen by Christ's gift. Today as we think of the Queenship of the Blessed Virgin Mary, let us think of how great God is, how his power and mercy are without limit, and how in union with Mary our sister, mother and queen, we may approach the throne of grace and ask that we be transformed into the likeness of her divine Son our Saviour.



Feast of St Bartholomew (August 24)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):2-3 Proclaim the salvation of God day by day; tell among the nations his glory.

Collect Strengthen in us, O Lord, the faith, by which the blessed Apostle Bartholomew clung wholeheartedly to your Son, and grant that through the help of his prayers your Church may become for all the nations the sacrament of salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Bartholomew, (August 24) Apostle. He was from Cana in Galilee, and is identified with Nathanael of John 1: 45 51. He is mentioned in the Gospel as one of the Twelve and was brought to Jesus by his friend, the apostle Philip. According to tradition, St Bartholomew preached the Gospel in Arabia and Armenia where he died a martyr.

Scripture today: Revelation 21:9b-14; Psalm 145:10-13, 17-18;
John 1:45-51

Philip found Nathanael and told him, We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Nazareth! Can anything good come from there? Nathanael asked. Come and see, said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false. How do you know me? Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you. Then Nathanael declared, Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel. Jesus said, You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that. He then added, I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. (John 1:45-51)

Nathanael In each of the Synoptic Gospels, the individual listed next to and after Philip is "Bartholomew" – and it is traditionally taken that this is the Nathanael who, John reports in his Gospel, is introduced to Jesus by Philip. Perhaps "Nathanael" is his first name (as "Philip"

was a first name), and presumably "Bartholomew" is the surname: *Bar-Tholomew*. He was Nathanael, the son of Tholomew. "Nathanael" appears Hebraic (*Nathan-a-el*), and Tholomew (*Tholomaios*) appears Greek. Perhaps, being from Galilee ("Galilee of the nations"), Nathanael's family had non-Hebraic origins. We notice too that in St Mark's list of the Twelve, Philip is placed next to, and just before, Bartholomew (Mark 3:18). It is the same with both Matthew (10:3) and Luke (6:14). Perhaps this indicates a special friendship and association between the two even within the Twelve. It may reflect their association with one another in the circumstances of their call, which is to say the order in which they met Jesus. In his Gospel, John does not give a formal list of the Twelve as do the Synoptics, but he certainly shows a direct association between Philip and Nathanael in their call to follow Christ. Philip is called first, and Philip then brings Nathanael to introduce him to Christ (John 1: 43-51). It is also interesting to notice that of the first of our Lord's disciples in his first chapter, John gives most space to the first meeting between Christ and Nathanael. He devotes six verses to the occasion – more than that given to the first

meetings of Jesus with John, Andrew, Simon and Philip. It suggests that for John the call of Nathanael has something quite special about it – but I would like here to notice one feature in particular. It is the joy and praise with which Christ welcomed Nathanael. If we look at the words of Christ addressed to others in this first chapter of St John, the most explicit words of praise are those directed to Nathanael. He, Nathanael, is "*a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile!*" (John 1: 47). Our Lord *praised* him. We remember how Christ said of the centurion that he had not found his equal in faith in all of Israel – fulsome *praise* for a gentile!

Let us consider this readiness of Christ to *praise* those deserving of it. I once saw a film documentary of Saint Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer. He was a Spanish priest who lived from 1902-1975, and who dedicated his life to spreading the point that, whatever be the Christian's walk in life, that person is called to be a saint. The film showed him speaking to a large concourse of people in, I think, Brazil. Following his animated address, full of warmth and clear teaching on the holiness

to which the ordinary person is called, he received questions from the audience. What was striking was how positive, *commendatory and encouraging* he was to each questioner. He was unstinting in his *praise* of people and unhesitatingly assured them that they were doing well and ought continue with even greater generosity. He did not hesitate to *praise* them. He would have brought happiness to people in their struggles. Even the viewer of the film would have felt encouraged and affirmed. Doubtlessly Escriva would have been severe with those who were neglectful of the moral and Christian life, but for those who were trying, he was fulsome in praise and encouragement – and in this, of course, he was a very good teacher. Now, when we consider the Gospels, we can see that in this characteristic, Escriva was *Christ-like*. Christ praised others for their faith, such as the Canaanite woman who pestered him for an exorcism of the demon in her daughter. She had great faith. In our Gospel today Jesus gives to Nathanael unstinting *praise*: he was a true Israelite, a true son of Abraham, a person of real truth. There was no guile in him. Our Lord's attack on those implacably hostile to him was for their lack of truth –

they were, for instance, hypocrites. Satan himself was a liar from the beginning. In Nathanael there was *no guile*, and because of this he immediately and totally responded in faith to the One before him who was Truth himself: *You are the Son of God, the Messiah!* But it began with Christ's high praise of Nathanael. While Satan, as we read in the book of Job, accuses (*ha-Satan*, accuser), Christ, the Son of God, praises, supports, commends those of good will.

Let us approach the throne of God in prayer with confidence in the mercy and compassion of God our Father, Jesus our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our Defender and Counsellor. We are surrounded with a cloud of witnesses who are our friends. Jesus Christ smiles on us as we struggle on, relying on his help. We fail and we repent, rising again for the onward struggle, smiling amid the wounds. Our Friend goes before us, praising, commending, encouraging. Let us place ourselves with Nathanael, and observe how the gaze of Christ passes on to us. He continues to smile as he reads our hearts, hearts that wish to follow him in love.

Second reflection (John 1: 45-51)

Dispositions Consider Nathanael's response to our Lord once he heard him speak (John 1: 45-51). Our Lord displayed a little of his power and knowledge beyond the ordinary: "*I saw you under the fig tree,*" he said to Nathanael. Nathanael's response went from what appears to have been something of doubt and possibly cynicism ("*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*") to a remarkable faith in our Lord and to a perception of his nature. "*You are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel*" — that is, Son of God and Messiah. When we remember that the purpose of St John's Gospel was precisely to show that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God (John 20:31), this is an impressive leap of faith at first meeting. What are we to make of it? It is clear that Nathanael was an Israelite of wonderful religious dispositions. He was so disposed that the slightest revelation of Christ's nature allowed him to pierce beyond the signs to the Person of our Lord behind. How different from so many our Lord would have to deal with! Our Lord himself acknowledged these impressive dispositions when he

said of the approaching Nathanael: "*There is an Israelite who deserves the name, incapable of deceit.*"

Nathanael was very good soil for the word of God. The seed sown bore fruit immediately. It shows the fundamental importance of *right dispositions* – which is to say, being *good soil*. Let us ask God to help us to be rightly disposed for what he has revealed, as coming to us from the Church.



The Martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist (August 29)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 119 (118):46-47 I spoke, O Lord, of your decrees before kings, and was not confounded; I pondered your commands and loved them greatly.

Collect O God, who willed that Saint John the Baptist should go ahead of your Son both in his birth and in his death, grant that, as he died a Martyr for truth and justice, we, too, may fight hard for the confession of what you teach. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist (August 29) The drunken oath of a king with a shallow sense of honour, a seductive dance and the hateful heart of a queen combined to bring about the martyrdom of John the Baptist. The greatest of prophets suffered the fate of so many Old Testament prophets before him: rejection and martyrdom. His heart was centred on God and the call that he heard from the Spirit of God

speaking to his heart. Confident of God's grace, he had the courage to speak words of condemnation or repentance, of salvation.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 1:17-19; Psalm 70; Mark 6:17-29

Herod gave orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you. And he promised her with an oath, Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom. She went out and said to her

mother, What shall I ask for? The head of John the Baptist, she answered. At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. (Mark 6:17-29)

The Martyr If the daughter of Herodias had not danced, John the Baptist may not have been martyred. Again, if Herod had not the sight of his birthday guests before him, he may not have given the order for John's execution. This is because the dancing empty-headed girl *pleased Herod and his dinner guests* – and obviously Herod thought his macho image would suffer if he demurred in acceding to the girl's nefarious request. Because of these rapid and ephemeral factors, *no*

time was given for the voice of conscience, for we read that “*he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head*”. The point being made here is that a variety of factors were at work in the martyrdom of John the Baptist. It does not appear to have been a matter of out-and-out hatred of revealed teaching which led *Herod* to his action. John did indeed die as a result of *Herodias’s* hatred of John and his witness to the illegality and immorality of Herod’s marriage to her. For this reason he was a martyr, dying because of hatred of the faith. But the point here is that many indirect factors and circumstances suddenly arose and fused to bring about the martyrdom of St John the Baptist. I venture to say that this is the case with very many martyrdoms. The “hatred of the faith” which is a feature of the circumstances of the death of those the Church recognizes as “martyrs” may be operative in very indirect ways. Indeed, it is possible for the martyr to be unaware of the motive driving those who effect this deed. St Thomas More knew exactly what he was dying for and he went ahead and gave his life for doctrines of the faith which were hated by the English king. But consider the Holy Innocents whose

martyrdom the Church celebrates during the Octave of Christmas. The infants in Bethlehem knew nothing of Jesus Christ and did not choose to lay down their lives for him nor for elements of his divine teaching. They had no choice in the matter, but died because of Herod's "hatred of the faith" – meaning his hatred of the infant Messiah announced to him by the visiting Magi from the East. They were unaware of Herod, unaware of his motives and unaware of Jesus Christ. Yet the Church celebrates them as martyrs of Jesus Christ, having died because of hatred of the faith, and doubtless having received the grace given in baptism – theirs a baptism of *blood*.

Those who give their lives for Christ in the ultimate sacrifice of "martyrdom" may do so in a variety of circumstances, direct and indirect. For this reason we may say in all truth that the life and death of a particular Christian may be a *virtual* martyrdom, or may *approach* what martyrdom involves. It may not be apparent to *others* that a martyrdom is involved in his or her case. Nor may the Church at large know – only God may know. All of this brings us to what John the

Baptist's martyrdom really involved and which should be imitated by every adherent of revealed religion. He heard God's word, assented to it totally, lived according to it, bore witness to it, and underwent the cost whatever that happened to be. The nature of his death was but the manifestation of the nature of his life of faith and obedience. When in the concentration camp the father of a family was selected among others to be executed in reprisal for an escape, Maximilian Kolbe stepped forward to take his place. He bore witness to the love of Jesus Christ and died a martyr, but this was the manifestation of his life of faith and witness lived for years prior to this moment. He had lived a life of *virtual* martyrdom – it *approached* a martyrdom in its *spirit*. If he had *not* lived thus, he may never have risen suddenly to this heroic level when the moment presented itself. John the Baptist's *life* was a life of heroic adherence to the word of God – in this sense it constantly *approached* a martyrdom in its *spirit*. He stepped forward to bear witness before Herod to the law of God and accepted the consequences. But the truly important thing was the way he had lived prior to this critical moment which befell him amid a particular set of

circumstances. Let us take this point from our celebration of the martyrdom of John the Baptist. It applies to all. After all, consider the very “Mother of Sorrows” – the one whom Simeon told a sword would pierce her very soul. He was telling her that she would be a martyr in her spirit precisely because of her union with her Son and the hatred of people for him. No human person suffered because of hatred of the faith to the degree that Mary the mother of Christ did. Yet few would have known this, and she did not die the death of a “martyr” – nor did, for that matter, the disciple whom our Lord loved and into whose hands he placed the care of his beloved mother.

During the second half of the third decade of the twentieth century Spain was wracked by its Civil War. A great number of Catholics were murdered and executed for hatred of the faith. Communists went after priests in particular and a great number died as a result. Many have been formally canonized by the Church. Saint Jose Maria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, made his way resolutely out of their reach and fled the country for he had a work

of God to do and this would be at an end were he to be “martyred”. We do not have to aspire to die the death of a martyr – this is not the message of our celebration today, even though some saints had this aspiration. What we must aspire to is what the martyr aspires to, namely living a *life* day by day of hearing the word of God as it comes to us in the Scriptures and the Church’s Tradition, assenting to it totally, living it faithfully, and bearing witness to it before others.



The Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary (September 8)

The birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary (September 8) The Church has celebrated Mary's birth since at least the sixth century. A September birth was chosen because the Eastern Church began its Church year with September. The September 8 date helped determine the date for the feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8 (nine months earlier). Scripture does not give an account of Mary's birth. However, the apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James* fills in the gap. This work has no historical value, but it does reflect the development of Christian piety. According to this account, Anna and Joachim are infertile but pray for a child. They receive the promise of a child that will advance God's plan of salvation for the world. Such a story (like many biblical counterparts) stresses the special presence of God in Mary's life from the beginning. St. Augustine connects Mary's birth with Jesus' saving work. He tells the earth to rejoice and shine forth in the light of her birth. "She is the flower of the field from whom bloomed the precious lily of the valley. Through her birth the nature inherited from our first parents is changed."

Scripture today: Micah 5:1-4 or Romans 8:28-30; Psalm 12;

Matthew 1:1-16.18-23

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel- which means, God with us. (Matthew 1: 18-23)

Mary Our Mother

In the beginning, we read, God created the heavens and the earth. The Book of Genesis tells us that darkness hung

over the deep, and the spirit or breath of God hovered over the abyss, awaiting God to give the word. Then God spoke, creating the heavens, the earth, the sun and the stars, the waters, the animals, the fish, the birds, and the vegetation. And, Genesis tells us, God saw that it was good. All this was preparing for his supreme work which was the creation of man. And so God said, let us make man in our own image and likeness. Man will be master of all this world, and I shall entrust it all to him for him to rule and to populate. The account in Genesis presents the creation of our first parents as something wonderful, the climax of God's work, and as almost a new beginning in its own right, for God created man in his own likeness. Man was filled with gifts of nature and of grace. But, as we read in the next account, how disappointing and how badly it suddenly turned out! Prompted by Satan, our first parents wished to be independent of God. They contravened God's command, thinking that by so doing they would be like gods. They sinned and so all was spoilt. A great wound, a mortal wound, was struck deep in human nature. Sin entered the human race and with sin death, and so death with all its implications spread through

the whole human race. It was a bad beginning, but then God, from his love, surprised fallen man. He promised a new beginning in the fullness of time. And so it was that he prepared a special people for the coming of a Redeemer, a new Adam, whose arrival would bring untold blessings to all. So great was this Redeemer that God also prepared a new Eve, one who would be the mother of the New Adam, the mother of the Redeemer, and through Him the new mother of all mankind. And this what we celebrate today, the feast of the birth of Mary the mother of the Redeemer, the mother of God and our heavenly mother. She is a daughter of Eve, but is the new Eve and mother of all the living, far more glorious than the first precisely because she heard the word of God and fulfilled it.

The first Eve, mother of all the living, besmirched and wounded herself and all her posterity with sin. The second Eve clothed herself in faith and obedience, and so was clothed in glory. This was because she heard the word of God and fulfilled it. *Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it*, our Lord said, when a woman from the crowd

praised the mother of so great a son. How great a mother! The Easter Vigil Exultet sings, *O happy fault, which won for us so great a Redeemer*. O happy fault committed by the first Eve, too, to win for us so great a mother, the second Eve, who would lead us to her Son. The angel Gabriel stood before her, addressing her with the most profound respect and love as before one who was full of grace and favour with God. *Behold the handmaid of the Lord*, she said to him, *be it done unto me according to your word*. At that point she became the mother of God. Let our minds slip back to the beginning when God entrusted Adam to Eve's love and keeping, Eve whom He had formed from Adam's side. Now God entrusts his own Son, the new Adam, to her keeping, to her who was the new Eve. He prepared for his Son a wonderful mother, and this wonderful mother is ours. At the Annunciation, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Father entrusted his Son to Mary's keeping. Let us, then, by the grace of this same Holy Spirit, entrust ourselves to her keeping. Years later she would stand before the Cross of her Son, watching what sin was doing to Him, and in intimate union with him in the work of our redemption. From the

Cross she would hear His words as he said to His beloved disciple, "*There is your Mother.*" The Church has always understood those words as applying to each of us. The new Eve, Mary the mother of the Redeemer, is our mother, and Christ has entrusted each of us to her, and wants each of us to entrust ourselves to her. That is what *consecration to Mary* means — it means a complete *entrusting of ourselves to her care and guidance*. So let us do that as we think of the birthday of our mother, the new Eve.

Mary is our mother and our model. She is the mother and model of the whole Church. God has given to the world a mother, the mother of all mankind. Let us entrust ourselves to her completely, every day remembering what she said at the wedding feast of Cana: "*Do whatever He tells you.*" If we let her, every day she will help us do that. Let us love her, pray to her, be guided by her.

A Second Reflection (Matthew 1: 18-23)

Mary our Mother and Model

One of the most powerful philosophical minds of the twentieth century was Martin Heidegger, whose life, though, was not admirable in other respects. His master work was *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*). It is one of the most celebrated philosophical works produced in Germany in the twentieth century. Whatever of the strengths and weaknesses of Heidegger's system, the title of his book reminds us that our being is inescapably temporal. We are inexorably caught up in passing time. Our lives pass rapidly, and so we constantly change for better or for worse — depending ultimately on our choices. As St Paul says (1 Cor. 7: 25-31) "*our time is growing short.*" We should live in the world, then, fully aware that "*the world as we know it is passing away.*" Cardinal Gabriel Garrone wrote in his book *Que Faut il Croire?* (1967) of the "*vast worth of every minute of our earthly life used with complete dedication, and the dignity of our human condition that makes us truly arbiters of our eternal destiny*" (p.122). We have limited time on our hands, with much to do for God, and with eternal repercussions. Let us not waste our time failing to gain the treasure of sanctity. Time is short, eternity

is long, as Cardinal Newman wrote at the end of one of his most famous works. Let us use to the full each day granted us as if it were our only and our last.

Let our constant inspiration be the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose birthday we celebrate today (September 8). She is the morally perfect human person in the moral sense, born free of original sin, and free of the slightest trace of sin all her days. Her days were ordinary and somewhat hidden, but lived to capacity with extraordinary holiness. She is our mother and our model.



Feast of the Triumph of the Cross (September 14)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Gal 6:14 We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered.

Collect O God, who willed that your Only Begotten Son should undergo the Cross to save the human race, grant, we pray, that we, who have known his mystery on earth, may merit the grace of his redemption in heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Victory of the Holy Cross (September 14) Early in the fourth century St. Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, went to Jerusalem in search of the holy places of Christ's life. She razed the Temple of Aphrodite, which tradition held was built over the Saviour's tomb, and her son built the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre over the tomb. During the excavation, workers found three crosses. The story is

that the one on which Jesus died was identified when its touch healed a dying woman. The cross immediately became an object of veneration.

Scripture today: Numbers 21:4b-9; Psalm 78:1bc-2, 34-38;

Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17

Jesus said to Nicodemus, No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven- the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:13-17)

The Cross One of the most striking features of the world is its *activity*. As we look out on a tranquil scene, and on pictures of the world at large, we might initially be tempted to think of the world as in repose, even static. But of course, the world is a huge, throbbing, churning factory. It never stops its work of causation and

production. Every part of it is acting upon other things and being acted upon by still other things. As, by analogy with human beings, we might say that a machine is at work, so the world is ever at work. Everywhere things are in formation, being caused to appear and function, or being replaced. Mountains gradually rise, valleys form, the animals build their abodes and hunt for food while being hunted themselves. Man, the pinnacle of this sea of activity, himself leads the way in his work. *He* is the one, *par excellence*, who *works*. He is born, and he soon begins to work. In the Book of Genesis we read that God blessed the man and the woman he had created, saying to them: "*Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth*" (1:28). Man had the prerogative of giving to all things their names (2: 19-20). It is by his work that he gains this dominion, but it is a dominion that must be exercised as one subject to the moral law of his Creator. He may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but he must not eat or even touch the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:16-17; 3:3). All this is to say that man, constituted lord of the world,

is meant by the Creator to strive for dominion. He is intended for achievements. He is meant for victory. But what has happened? He fell in defeat, and it was his own undoing. He fell because he sought a dominion according to his own law and not according to God's. He grasped and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (3:6). So, intended for dominion, he became enslaved, and the victor was sin and death. Man was crushed in defeat and cast out of the garden. Having taken from the forbidden tree, gone was his power to take from the tree of life, and thus live forever (Genesis 3:22).

Thus did there enter upon the world a Figure never intended by the Creator. That Figure was a dark, blood-stained, grinning ogre. It was unconquerable, and it would smash every human being. No matter how common the victories of man in his work, he was bound for defeat because his meeting with this dark Figure was inevitable. It was the one enemy he could not outdo, no matter how much he struggled and fought it off. It sought him out, whoever he may be, and it would overcome. That Figure is Death. I remember watching a movie in

which, to save his family, a good man courageously stepped forward to fight a hard and evil champion. He began very well, striking many telling blows and matching force with force, but from the outset it appeared that his defeat was inevitable. And so it was. He was overcome and destroyed. Man cannot now win. He is subject to Death because of the Original Sin that separated him from God and rendered him prone to personal sin. What, then, is the answer, if there be one? The answer is Death. At the beginning, God promised a grand reversal. The heel of the woman's offspring would strike the serpent's head. Surprise of God! When an enemy advances, one looks about for weapons with which to resist and overcome. But Death would be the weapon against Death. God sent his own divine Son to turn the inexorable tide from death to life eternal, and his great tool, his weapon of war, would be death itself. He freely and obediently submitted to death which, like a terrible engine of war, came towards him intending to destroy. The engine was fuelled by Satan and his minions. The Prince of this world was on his way, and his host was Death. In the plan of God, it was by submitting to death in bearing witness to his

truth that Christ would overcome death. *This must never happen to you!* Peter said to Christ, and Christ rebuked him as speaking for Satan, for he was not thinking as God thinks, but as man. And so Jesus Christ went to his death in fulfilment of the plan of God. He died a terrible death outside the City, a seeming defeat, the defeat that is universal for man, and in that defeat he gained the victory. It was the Triumph of the Cross.

In Jesus Christ, the defeat that is the Cross is the triumph of the Cross. Man now knows how to defeat the grand enemy of every man, which is Death. The weapon of victory is obedient submission to the will of God in sufferings and death. When sufferings and death come, they become our friends instead of our enemies, if we but submit to the will of God in union with the suffering and crucified Christ. Suffering and death, accepted in this way, become the path to glory forever. It is the distinctive teaching of Christ and Christianity that the Cross is man's means of happiness and life. Let us look to Christ and to union with him, then!

A Second Reflection: (Philippians 2: 6-11)

The Triumph of the Cross There is an expression we often hear: "the top dog." Many try to be the top dog. I remember one family had a dog that had been the family pet for some time. Then another dog was brought into the family, a large pup, and soon after its arrival the family dog dug up all its largest bones and put them together. Then it stood over them, while the other dog watched, all agitated, barking from a distance. The family dog was showing by the display of all the large bones in its possession that it was the top dog, and the other dog could see it and felt it. In this particular respect, how like dogs many people are! But what do we see God do, the one infinite God with whom no creature can remotely compare in glory? God chose to be lowly and humble. St Paul says that the Son of God did not cling to his divine "condition" but assumed the "*condition of a slave, and became as men are: and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross*" (Phil. 2: 6-11). This then was his glory, his

lifting up, the manifestation of his divine character, to lower himself in his love for us. It was a triumph of pure and humble love, the clearest revelation of God's true glory. The glory of the Lord was revealed on the Cross.

Let us pray for the grace to be like God in humbling ourselves, to accept and choose as did the Son of God the lowest place, leaving it to him to raise us up in glory.



Our Lady of Sorrows (September 15)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Lk 2:34-35 Simeon said to Mary: Behold, this child is destined for the ruin and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign of contradiction; and your own soul a sword will pierce.

Collect O God, who willed that, when your Son was lifted high on the Cross, his Mother should stand close by and share his suffering, grant that your Church, participating with the Virgin Mary in the Passion of Christ, may merit a share in his Resurrection. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Our Lady of Sorrows. (September 15) This feast has its origin in that Christian devotion which associates her with the Passion of her Son. Pope Pius VII extended this devotion to the whole Church and, in 1912, St Pius X fixed the feast on this day, within the octave of the Nativity of our Mother the Virgin. Our Mother the Virgin Mary teaches us to live, together with her, beside the Cross of her Son. In her

suffering as co redeemer, she reminds us of the tremendous malice of sin and shows us the way of true repentance. St. Ambrose (December 7) in particular sees Mary as a sorrowful yet powerful figure at the cross. Mary stood at the cross while others fled. Mary looked on her Son's wounds with pity, but saw in them the salvation of the world.

Scripture today: Hebrews 5:7-9; Psalm 30; John 19:25-27 or
Luke 2:33-35

Jesus' father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted and you yourself a sword will pierce so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:33-35)

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Behold,

your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. (John 19:25-27)

Mother of Sorrows St Matthew's account of the infancy of Jesus Christ goes for some 48 verses over two chapters. St Luke's account goes for 132 verses over two chapters, not far short of three times the length of Matthew's account. Although the division into chapters came well after the writing of the Gospels, it is of interest to note that Luke's two infancy chapters are among the longest of his chapters – the first being the longest, and the second being among the longest. His infancy narrative (chapters 1 and 2) is the longest section of his Gospel, slightly longer in terms of verses than even his account of the Passion and Death of Christ (chapters 22 and 23), which includes the betrayal and the preparations for the Last Supper. If we add the final chapter (24) on the Resurrection appearances, then of course, the final chapters exceed in length the Infancy chapters. But these facts alone suggest the importance that Luke attached to his account of the infancy of Christ. It also may suggest a special link between the Infancy and the Passion. In

terms of weight and length, the Gospel structure seems to be pegged down at either end, one by the Infancy, the other by the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord. Luke begins his Gospel by telling us that many had drawn up an account of the Gospel events as attested by eye-witnesses. He too has accurately investigated from their source (or beginning) "all (these) things" (1:3). It also seems manifest that, directly or indirectly, a principal source for the long Infancy narrative was Mary the mother of the Lord. One of the notable features of this narrative is the progressive revelation Mary is given of the mission of her divine Son and of her own role. The Angel tells her that he will be Son of the Most High and Son of David. He will be the Messiah-King, and of his kingdom there will be no end (1:32-33). Her role is also stated: she is to be truly his mother. This will be by the power of the Most High and by the coming upon her of the Holy Spirit, and that therefore he, the Messiah, will be called Son of God (1:35).

A notable advance in this revelation to Mary comes with the words of Simeon, speaking under inspiration (2:28-35). The Lord's

Messiah, whom he briefly holds in his arms, is God's salvation for the peoples, the light of the Gentiles and the glory of Israel. Then the Cross is strongly intimated. The Cross had not been mentioned by the Angel, who had emphasized his glory and triumph. But now there is this further revelation of the Cross. The Child will be the cause of the rise and the fall of many in Israel, and he will be spoken against. He will be *a sign of contradiction*. He will be opposed. So his mission will be achieved amid great strife. The glory will come, but at the cost of much pain. Then Simeon, still under inspiration, turns to the mother. The Angel had announced to her that in God's plan she was to be truly his mother. Now she is informed that she is to suffer with him, and suffer profoundly. In the midst of the very sentence declaring that the Child will be hotly opposed, she is told that her soul will be thrust through with a sword. While the sword of hostility will strike her Son, "*a sword will go through your soul also*" (*kai sou de autēs*) (2: 34-35). So the mother of the Messiah will be a mother who suffers and dies with him – she will suffer and die in her soul. The Cross looms large before the first and foremost Christian, the one who is full of

grace and who is blessed among all women. The Son of God and Messiah will be attacked and resisted, and she who is his mother and first disciple will be martyred with him in spirit. She is to be the mother of sorrows. Her mission is to give him to the world and to accompany him in carrying the Cross. That is what Luke says. John's Gospel is a distinct testimony, overflowing with richness. John tells us about Mary, the Woman, at the scene of the crucifixion (John 19:25-27). She is entrusted to John by Christ himself, and she lived the rest of her life in his care. Perhaps Luke had not only spoken to Mary about the Infancy, but to John too. The Church has always understood Christ's final gift of Mary to John as being also a gift of Mary to the Church. She, the mother of sorrows, is mother of Christ and mother of all Christ's faithful.

Our Lord laid down the condition of discipleship. *If any one wishes to come after me*, he said, *let him deny himself, take up his cross every day, and come after me*. Our Lady was taught this at the very beginning. Being his mother would mean bearing his Cross with

him. If we wish to be Christ's disciples, we must learn the same lesson. Mary our mother in Christ can teach us this by her example and her all-powerful intercession. Let us ask her to pray for us now and at the hour of our death. Let us ask that we might have the grace to accept wholeheartedly, and with abandonment to the will of God, the cross as it comes to us, both now and at the end.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 2:33-35; John 19:25-27)

Our Lady of Sorrows Perhaps the most fundamental issue in a serious following of our Lord is the attitude we choose to take to suffering. Obedience in suffering is a necessary component of the following of Christ. In some sense this obedience in suffering is the high point of the Christian life and the moment of its greatest fruitfulness. This is clear from the fact that it was this in the life of our Lord himself — the Cross was the summit of his life and the special source of our redemption. This is a most difficult thing to embrace, and it is a gift of grace to be able to do so, requiring as well a repeated effort on our part. But we have a mother to help us on our way to it, she who

was the first and foremost Christian, the first to carry the Cross of Christ with him, the one who in Christ bore the greatest sorrows. She, the mother of sorrows, can teach us how to do it, how to take up our cross each day and follow in the footsteps of the crucified Master.

Let us pray to Our Lady of Sorrows, taking her as our mother and model into our home as did John after Calvary, the home of our souls where dwells the Blessed Trinity if we are in the state of grace. Let us ask her to gain for us the grace to live accepting with love the Cross of Christ.



Feast of St Matthew the Apostle (September 21)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 28: 19-20 Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, says the Lord.

Collect O God, who with untold mercy were pleased to choose as an Apostle Saint Matthew, the tax collector, grant that, sustained by his example and intercession, we may merit to hold firm in following you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St. Matthew (September 21) Son of Alphaeus, Matthew was a publican, that is, a tax collector for the Romans. His profession was despised by the Jews. Nevertheless, our Lord called him to be an apostle. Matthew's vocation reminds us that sanctity is not restricted only to certain states in life. All professions, all our work and all our other endeavours should be sanctified. We do not know details of his evangelization or of his martyrdom which by most accounts took place

in Persia or Ethiopia. Tradition unanimously acknowledges him as the author of the first Gospel, written in Aramaic, and afterwards translated into Greek. St. Matthew's name appears with those of the other apostles in the Roman Canon.

Scripture today: Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13; Psalm 19:2-5;

Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'? On hearing this, Jesus said, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Matthew 9:9-13)

Matthew's Call While Jesus is growing up in Nazareth, another boy is growing up elsewhere in the same region of Galilee, perhaps in Capernaum. There is nothing about him that makes him stand out, and while Jesus moves into the trade of his foster-father Joseph, this boy eventually accepts the position of tax-collector. Perhaps he had little opportunity for working as an artisan, and the opportunity suddenly presented itself of employment as a tax-collector – perhaps through a friend. A tax-collector gathered the customs on exports and imports and taxes, and his office for the "receipt of custom" was at city gates, on public roads, or bridges. The tax-collector was not respected by the religious Jew, for he was employed by pagan Rome, and his work was, in the nature of the case, an oppression on those from whom he took the tribute. One would have thought that the mere fact that he accepted a position that was not respected by the religious element of the nation would suggest that he himself was not distinguished in his religion. That is not to say that he was positively oppressive and dishonest in his despised profession. We do not know. However, on the face of it, at most he could look forward to a fairly ordinary life,

liked among his tax-collector confreres, observing his religion to a degree, and then being lost from view once he passed from this life to the next. Such may have been Matthew. But a singular event in his life occurred – it was the slight pause before him of Jesus of Nazareth. Christ had just come from the house where he had forgiven a crippled man's sins, healed him of his paralysis, and confronted the silent criticism of the religious leaders. He came out of the house, saw Matthew there – an ordinary tax collector – and said to him, "*Follow me!*" He had not been introduced to our Lord. John and Andrew were encouraged by John the Baptist to follow our Lord. Andrew introduced his brother Simon to our Lord. Not so with Matthew. Our Lord simply paused, gazed on Matthew briefly, saw what were the yearnings of his heart, and called on him to follow him, which Matthew promptly did.

There are two things about this brief event. Firstly, our Lord unaccountably stopped before Matthew and chose to call him. It was not just a sudden and chance event – something Jesus Christ did on the spur of the moment because of, say, a sudden interest in Matthew that

took hold of him. No, it was a deliberate choice. St Paul writes that *before the world began, God chose us in Christ to be holy and full of love in his sight*. Though Matthew did not know it, and though Matthew's family, friends and acquaintances did not know it, God had marked him all along. Matthew's call illustrates the free call of Christ to each one of *us*. It is a pure gift and is in no way due to our own qualities and merits. It was not Matthew's merits that attracted the attention and the call of Christ. But the second notable fact about this event is Matthew's most worthy response. He did not hesitate, but simply got up and followed him. Christ was not inviting him to some special position. He was not at that point inviting him to be one of the foundation stones of his Church – a member of the Twelve. That would come only later. There was no other carrot at the end of the stick. All he was being asked to do was to follow him – to leave his profession and his prospects behind, and to make Jesus of Nazareth his entire future. How do we account for *his immediate response*? He had the right dispositions, and this response was the fruit not only of grace but of his own mind and heart as it had formed during the years

immediately prior to the call. Underneath the ordinariness of his life to that point, underneath the dubious work he was doing, there must have been a good soul who had the moral wherewithal to know what and who was good. He knew that the Man before him was pre-eminently holy. He immediately knew that the invitation just extended was the chance of a lifetime. If he had hesitated, he may have then refused, as did the rich young man. He did not hesitate, and his friendship with Christ led to his being chosen as an Apostle, writing his Gospel for all generations ahead of him, giving his life for Jesus Christ, and reigning gloriously with him forever in heaven.

On the feast of St Matthew the Apostle, let us think of the call Jesus Christ extended to us at our baptism. He called us to follow him, and immediately gave us the means to do it – which is the gift of the Holy Spirit and the particular supernatural gifts that make an immediate and lasting response possible. Every morning on rising we ought in our hearts hear the words of Christ yet again: "*Follow me.*" Let us imitate Matthew in the immediacy of our response. Matthew loves to tell the

reader that he was a mere tax collector – he is praising the love and grace of God, and pointing to himself to show what it can do for us. Let us thank and praise Christ for his call, then!



Saints Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Archangels

(September 29)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 103 (102):20 Bless the Lord, all you his angels, mighty in power, fulfilling his word, and heeding his voice.

Collect O God, who dispose in marvellous order ministries both angelic and human, graciously grant that our life on earth may be defended by those who watch over us as they minister perpetually to you in heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, Archangels (September 29) Angels — messengers from God — appear frequently in Scripture, but only Michael, Gabriel and Raphael are named. **Michael** ("Who is like God") appears in Daniel's vision; in the Book of Revelation, he leads God's armies to final victory over the forces of evil. The Church in the West began to observe a feast honouring Michael and the angels in the fifth

century. **Gabriel** ("Strength of God") also makes an appearance in Daniel's visions, announcing Michael's role in God's plan. He is sent to Mary, who consents to bear the Messiah. **Raphael** ("Medicine of God") is confined to the Old Testament story of Tobit.

Scripture today: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 or Revelation 12:7-12ab;

Psalm 138:1-5;

John 1:47-51

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false. How do you know me? Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree before Philip called you. Then Nathanael declared, Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel. Jesus said, You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig-tree. You shall see greater things than that. He then added, I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. (John 1:47-51)

Archangels The Church warmly recommends a loving devotion to the Angels of God, but in this day and age one hears of “angels” that have nothing to do with the Church. There are many people who have no specifically Christian practice in their lives and nothing to do with the Church, who seek to “connect with their angels.” It has become a New Age fad. Even the pictures of such “angels” have a non-biblical and un-traditional look about them. One New Age author, Diana Cooper, used to hold workshops for people to contact angels. She herself claimed to allow angels to guide her life. In her book, *A Little Light on Angels* (p.108), she writes that angels of light say, “Follow your heart. This is your higher purpose.” Cooper writes that “Religions tell people what to do and what to believe. Spirituality tells people to listen to their own guidance and follow their hearts” (p. 114). So, objective dogma and revealed religion are of little account, and certainly Christ and his Church are irrelevant. No proof for all this is offered — it is based on faith in the one making these claims. Angels in this context are a branch of the occult, and to tinker with such thinking and practices is to open the door to that sphere. They corrupt and

disgrace the name of “Angels,” who are messengers of the one true and triune God, Father, Son and Spirit. Our secular-minded world is characterised by a striking dichotomy. There is the culture of profound suspicion against anything that cannot be tested and measured empirically. There is also, in reaction to this, a host of spurious religious counterfeits. The counterfeits of religion include much talk of “angels.” So the Christian must have a clear idea of the basis of his belief in Angels, and a truly satisfactory notion of them. The basis of our belief in, and devotion to, the Angels is the word of Jesus Christ as explained by his Church. In fact, divine revelation as expressed in Scripture and the Church’s Tradition contains an abundance of references to the angels. They appear at the beginning of the Bible, when God stationed “*the cherubim... to guard the way to the tree of life*” (Genesis 3:24). They appear many times at the end in the Book of Revelation, when angels are active protagonists in the visions of the author.

A whole book of the Old Testament is given over to the work of a particular angel, and his charge, Tobit. That angel is Raphael, and we have many of his words recorded in that inspired book. Michael appears in both the Old Testament and the New. Raphael appears in the Old Testament, and Gabriel appears in the Old Testament, and of course in the Gospel of St Luke. Christ himself was helped by Angels, notably in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was weighed down by the Agony of his coming Passion. Soon after, at the point of his arrest in the same Garden, he told Simon Peter, that were he but to ask his heavenly Father, he would be sent twelve legions of Angels to defend him. Christ speaks of the Angels of little children being before his Father in heaven. We get the impression, by such statements of Christ, and other texts in Scripture, such as those in the book of Revelation, that there are great numbers of angels. There are ascending classes of them too, and the great theologians have deduced that each Angel is its own species. So the immense beauty of the range of species in the visible world is reflected with much greater splendour in the angelic population of the unseen world. In our Gospel passage today, our Lord

again refers to the Angels — “*I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man*” (John 1:47-51), he says to Nathanael. The point is that the disciple of Jesus Christ takes for granted that there are Angels as our Lord describes them. They have the mission to be our friends, and God wants us to cultivate them as such. One of the many striking literary pieces of Cardinal Newman — beatified in September 2010 — is his description of the soul of Gerontius going to Purgatory for his purification. *The Dream of Gerontius* has even been set to music in a symphony by Elgar. Gerontius’ guardian Angel, who has guided him through life, attends him as he passes on to Purgatory. He has been saved, and all that is required now is his purification before being admitted to the presence of God.

The angels are our true friends, so let us become devoted to them. Today the Church singles out three Archangels who feature prominently in Scripture, and whose names are given to us therein. There are prayers to each of them, most well-known of which

is the prayer to St Michael the Archangel, guardian of God's people. The angels are filled with love for God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and are like him in their love for us. Let us lean on them and invoke their help and intercession, for we hope that one day we shall be with them forever in heaven.

A Second Reflection: (Luke 9:57-62)

The Archangels In one passage (Luke 9:57-62) St Luke describes an encounter between our Lord and three different people. With each of them, the issue is their following of him. Two of them volunteered to follow our Lord, and the third was asked by our Lord to follow him. With each of them, they raised a problem that involved some obstacle to their wholehearted following of him. Just before his entry into heaven, Christ charged his disciples with the mission of making disciples of all the nations. In the plan of God, a meeting with Christ is meant to result in the following of him. Further, our Lord wants this following of him to be total, whatever be the walk of life in which we are called to pass our days. In the case of the three our Lord meets in

the passage cited above, there was some limitation preventing their total following of him.

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Memorial of The Guardian Angels (October 2)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 103 (102):20 Bless the Lord, all you his angels, mighty in power, fulfilling his word, and heeding his voice.

Collect O God, who dispose in marvellous order ministries both angelic and human, graciously grant that our life on earth may be defended by those who watch over us as they minister perpetually to you in heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Guardian Angels (October 2) Guardian angels are not just for children. Their role is to represent individuals before God, to watch over them always, to aid their prayer and to present their souls to God at death. The concept of an angel assigned to guide and nurture *each* human being is a development of Catholic doctrine and piety based on Scripture but not directly drawn from it. Jesus' words in Matthew 18:10 best support the belief: "*See that you do not despise one of these little*

ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father.” Devotion to the angels began to develop with the birth of the monastic tradition. St. Benedict gave it impetus and Bernard of Clairvaux, the great 12th-century reformer, was such an eloquent spokesman for the guardian angels that angelic devotion assumed its current form in his day. A feast in honour of the guardian angels was first observed in the 16th century. In 1615, Pope Paul V added it to the Roman calendar. "May the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem.” (Rite for Christian Burial)

Scripture today: Exodus 23:20-23; Psalm 90; Matthew 18:1-5, 10

The disciples approached Jesus and said, “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?” He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me. “See

that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father.” (Matthew 18:1-5, 10)

Guardian Angel One of the most attractive of nineteenth-century saints was the Italian priest, John Bosco, the founder of the two Salesian Congregations of priests and sisters. His life was given over to the apostolate for youth — a ministry for which he had a tremendous talent. On a few occasions in his life when he was on errands that took him into dark and seedy back alleys, he was approached by hoodlums who intended to attack him. It was the period of Italian anti-clericalism. Suddenly out of nowhere in the dark two large ferocious dogs appeared and attacked the thugs, driving them in terror from the scene. Within minutes the side-street was deserted, with Don Bosco left alone to continue on his errand of mercy. He was in no doubt that it was his Guardian Angel who had arranged his sudden deliverance. I remember being told on good authority some years back of an event that occurred in Australia. Without my being sure of all the details, it

went something like this. A solitary young woman was awaiting transport in a certain location and a man was standing not far from her. Days later the man was apprehended by police. He was a wanted man, a dangerous criminal and rapist. Somehow the woman was contacted and, as a witness, brought before the man who was now under arrest. He was asked if he saw her on that occasion, and he admitted that he had — and he was asked why he had left her alone, solitary as she was. While not admitting to violent intentions, he said that, anyway, there were two strong young men accompanying her as she stood there. But she told them that, on the contrary, she was alone. Much struck by his testimony, she became sure that it was her Guardian Angel who had caused the phenomenon. I myself am very careful to observe the speed limits on the roads, but on one occasion my mind wandered and the car increased in speed just beyond the limit. It was in an area where there were cameras. Unaccountably, the thought suddenly entered my mind: *slow down!* I did so, and was saved from the camera just ahead. At the time I was sure that this was due to my Guardian Angel.

One of the notable features of modern youth is the number who are vibrantly religious. God, Christ and the Church are living realities for them. At the same time, there are many youth who are deeply imbued with the culture of our day. It is a culture that regards this world as all there is. What is real is what can be seen and felt. The unseen is a phantom. For those held in the grip of this perspective, Angels are just fairies. That is to say, they are nothing. There are those who accept Christ but who regard the Christianity of classical dogma as absolutely dated. It must all be re-interpreted according to what is now regarded as likely. Miracles are unlikely, as are many things plainly reported in the Gospels. The Angels are unlikely too — in fact, they are just a little preposterous. But no. If we accept the divine authority of the Scriptures at all, it is plain that we must accept the fact of the Angels. They intervene frequently in Holy Scripture, and we have it on the word of Jesus Christ himself that there are certainly Angels who guard us. In our Gospel today (Matthew 18:1-5, 10), our Lord speaks of the Angels of little children. Our Lord speaks of Angels playing a part in the final judgment on the world. They will be sent out to gather

the just from among the unjust. Christ told Simon Peter that he could summon in an instant twelve legions of Angels to defend him against any threat. Were Christ to do just this, we might call such a host twelve legions of Guardian Angels, because their mission would be to guard Christ. Soon after Christ's birth, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to get up immediately and flee to Egypt. Herod was out to kill the Child. Perhaps Herod's henchmen were on their way on foot or on horseback. When they arrived, the eagle had flown. That Angel served as a Guardian Angel to the Christ-child. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ was stricken with such sorrow as, he said, to be almost at the point of death. An Angel appeared to sustain him. That Angel served as a Guardian Angel to the Lord of lords, assisting him to bear the sin of the world, and to take it away.

The angelic world is very hard at work assisting us on our way to God. They have the mission to defend and guide us on our journey. Let us think of how God sent Raphael, "the holy Angel of the Lord" to assist Tobias. The book of Tobit provides a classic example of

the work of the Guardian Angels. We are all on a grand journey, and we are all sick and wounded. We need sight and we need strength, and we each have a Guardian Angel to assist us on our way as Raphael assisted the son of Tobit. Every day let us pray to our Guardian Angel to lead us to holiness and to heaven.

A Second Reflection:

Praying to our Guardian Angels St Alphonsus Ligouri has written that the reason why we do not receive from God much more than we do is that we fail to ask for it, or fail to ask in the right way. Our Lord repeatedly tells us in the Gospel that if we ask we shall receive, and there are many cases in the Gospels of people who received favours only because they asked for them. Had they not asked, they may not have received. If this is so in our relations with God, presumably it is so also in our relations with our Guardian Angels because they are God's envoys for our sake. Today we think of them. We each of us is entrusted to an Angel to guard and guide us through life. As a holy and intelligent person, the angel will fulfill his role. But how much more

will we benefit if we have repeated recourse to him. Let us actively acknowledge his presence. Let us ask him to carry our petitions to God. Let us ask him to help us to be led by the Holy Spirit. Our Angel is our God-given friend. He will aid us if we ask him.

Let us cultivate an explicit devotion to our Guardian Angel, and even have recourse also to the Angel of whatever person we are trying to help by our contact or our daily work.



Feast of St Luke the Evangelist (October 18)

Entrance Antiphon Is 52:7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings of peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation!

Collect Lord God, who chose Saint Luke to reveal by his preaching and writings the mystery of your love for the poor, grant that those who already glory in your name may persevere as one heart and one soul and that all nations may merit to see your salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Luke, Evangelist. (October 18) A physician from Antioch, he was converted to the Christian faith. He was a disciple of St Paul and a faithful companion in all his journeys. He was the author of the third Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles. He was the evangelist who wrote about the childhood of Jesus and who has told us some of the most moving parables of the Lord, such as that of the lost sheep and the

prodigal son. In his gospel he highlights the universality of salvation. He makes special mention of the mother of Jesus.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 4:10-17b; Psalm 145; Luke 10:1-9

The Lord Jesus appointed seventy two disciples whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit. He said to them, "The harvest is abundant but the labourers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out labourers for his harvest. Go on your way; behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves. Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals; and greet no one along the way. Into whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this household.' If a peaceful person lives there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. Stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you, for the labourer deserves payment. Do not move about from one house to another. Whatever town you enter and they welcome you, eat what is set before you, cure the sick in it and say to them, 'The Kingdom of God is at hand for you.'" (Luke 10:1-9)

Faithful Luke Luke was not, of course, one of the Twelve. Nor, as far as I am aware, has he ever been given the title of Apostle – as was St Paul, who, though an Apostle was not one of the Twelve either. It is clear that though Christ gave to the Twelve the title of '*Apostolos*' (envoy or ambassador), he did not formally intend the word to be restricted to the Twelve. St Paul, for instance, gives the term a wider application. Further, though Paul possessed the fullness of the Christian priesthood (that is, he was what we now call a 'bishop'), and founded local churches with the authority to ordain presbyters and bishops, I am not aware of any evidence that Luke was a presbyter, let alone a bishop. St Paul's words in Colossians 4:11 would imply that he was a Gentile by birth, and in 4:14 that he was a physician. Eusebius has him being born in Antioch, Syria. He was, then, a fervent and totally committed lay convert to Jesus Christ – the Church celebrates him as a Saint – though we do not know the story of his conversion. He was the companion of St Paul on at least part of his second and third missionary journeys, and attended to Paul during his prison detainment in Caesarea and Rome. Beyond this we know little, except what may be deduced of

his Christian mind from the very content of his inspired writing. As a valued friend, companion and disciple of St Paul, one on whom Paul doubtlessly depended for practical assistance at least as physician if not more, he had the benefit of daily association with one of the greatest masters of the Gospel message. As a lay convert with such a teacher and friend, Luke's understanding of the Gospel, then, would have been great. We cannot be sure of when and where Luke put his gospel account together, but in Acts 1:1 Luke refers to his former book, indicating that his Gospel was generally completed before the Acts. Then, inasmuch as the Acts does not include Paul's martyrdom (28: 30), one suspects that the two works were completed during Paul's lifetime. But Paul makes no mention of so signal a production by his valued companion, so we cannot be sure. If Luke's two books were in formation during his travels with Paul, Paul himself would surely have benefited from Luke's careful investigation of the history, even of the very childhood, of Jesus Christ.

The few references to Luke in the Letters of St Paul do not mention directly evangelical activity on his part. Doubtlessly he assisted Paul not only as physician but in his proclamation of the Gospel in places he visited, but this is not the primary feature of Luke's contribution to the work of evangelization. Yet he is known in the tradition and life of the Church as Luke the Evangelist, and this is because of his great work of writing the Gospel and the Acts. He professes to be writing history, and like all good history it is not a mere annals of events, but enshrines various perspectives on the facts. As an historian, I believe he is comparable with the great Greek and Latin writers, but in his case he is not a *mere* historian. He is the instrument of the Holy Spirit, who inspired and guided his writing for both his immediate audience and for the ages to come. Now, Luke's two works constitute nearly a quarter of the entire New Testament, and in size are close behind the corpus of the Letters of St Paul (for the Letter to the Hebrews is not now regarded as having been written by Paul himself, though it is Pauline). This is the work of a Christian *lay* convert, a man with a profound understanding of the meaning of the Christian Gospel

and the work of Jesus Christ and his Church (for he had the best of teachers), and one with a scarcely paralleled command of the facts of the case (due to his own careful investigation of them). All of this he expressed in two timeless documents of limpid beauty and clarity. Could we not regard Luke as a most notable instance of the great contribution to the life of the Church which not only the *convert* to the Church can make, but which the *lay* faithful also can make? Each member of Christ's faithful brings his or her own gifts to the mission of Christ and the Church. That mission is to know and love Jesus Christ, and to bring the knowledge and love of man's Redeemer to the world. St Luke the Evangelist has much to teach us of the universal call to holiness and mission.

Let us contemplate the winning figure of the modest Luke, quiet, self-effacing, dedicated, most industrious, accomplished. How greatly he loved Christ and his Church! How much careful industry must have gone into the production of his Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles! His care with detail, his love in bringing it all to fruition, and

the unending fruits of holiness which his work has produced and will ever produce to the end of the world, beggar calculation. We know nothing of Luke's childhood and early adulthood, but God was preparing a signal instrument for his purposes. Let us learn from the life and work of Saint Luke, and place ourselves entirely at the disposal of the Holy Spirit. He will give to our lives their intended value.

A Second Reflection: (2 Timothy 4:10-17; Luke 10:1-19)

Christian Loyalty In the brief passage from his second letter to Timothy (4: 10-17), St Paul refers to various people, including St Luke. Some of these deserted him (Demas), others were dependable and useful (Mark), others did him harm (Alexander). He mentions in passing that "*only Luke is with me.*" As we read of these individuals, we cannot but be reminded that a central issue in the life and apostolate of the Christian is loyalty – loyalty to Christ and loyalty to those who are in Christ. St Paul writes that Luke was loyal. Our Lord asked for loyalty in his disciples – loyalty to the mission entrusted to them. We think of this as we read that the "*Lord appointed seventy two others and*

sent them out ahead of him, in pairs, to all the towns and places he himself was to visit" (Luke 10:1). They had to be loyal to their vocation and mission.

Let us think of Christ's loyalty to his immense mission given to him by his Father. Let us think of the loyalty of St Paul to Christ and to the Church. Let us think of Luke's loyalty to the Person of our Lord, inspiring him to write his Gospel. Let us think, too, of Luke's loyalty to Paul who was deserted in times of tribulation. Thinking of these examples of loyalty, let us resolve to be loyal to God and his holy will every day until death, no matter what the cost.



Saints Simon and Jude, Apostles (October 28)

Entrance Antiphon These are the holy men whom the Lord chose in his own perfect love; to them he gave eternal glory.

Collect O God, who by the blessed Apostles have brought us to acknowledge your name, graciously grant, through the intercession of Saints Simon and Jude, that the Church may constantly grow by increase of the peoples who believe in you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Saints Simon and Jude, Apostles (October 28) Jude is so named by Luke and Acts. Matthew and Mark call him Thaddeus. Simon is mentioned on all four lists of the apostles. On two of them (e.g., Luke's) he is called "the Zealot." Our Simon the Apostle became an ardent lover and Apostle of Jesus Christ, a great saint, as did Jude his companion. Just as Christ was sent by the Father, so also he sent the apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Scripture today: Ephesians 2:19-22; Psalm 19:2-5; Luke 6:12-16

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountain to pray, and spent the whole night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. (Luke 6:12-16)

Simon and Jude In our passage today (Luke 6:12-16), our Lord spends the whole night praying to God, and when morning comes he calls his “disciples” to him and from them he selects the Twelve, whom he calls “*apostoloi*,” which is to say his *envoys*, his *ambassadors*. While the others are his “disciples,” which is to say learners being led and taught by their Master, the Twelve are also his “representatives,” acting to a point in his name. They are his envoys. It is the beginning of the launching of the Church, its structure, and its share in his mission. We are not told, of course, what our Lord prayed about “the whole night”

prior to this action, but I do *not* think it was over *who* should constitute the Twelve. The special mention Luke has already given to Simon, James and John (4:38 and 5:2-11)) would suggest that the vocation of each of the Twelve was clear. After all, St Paul writes in one of his Letters that from before the foundation of the world, we were chosen in Christ to be full of love in his sight. The call of God has its origins in eternity, and each of the Twelve — unbeknown to them — had received their vocation as God's gift. Jesus, therefore, knew exactly who he intended to call. But he prayed *for them* and *for the Church* he was in the process of founding. Let us imagine our Lord that night in prayer, bearing in his heart each of the disciples he would choose — and indeed all of his disciples who would gather before him on the morrow, and all of his disciples to come generation after generation. One of the disciples he did not choose to be one of the Twelve *then*, would indeed become one of the Twelve *after* his Ascension: *Matthias*. Luke notes and describes the fact that Matthias had been with Jesus from the beginning (Acts 1:21-26). So let us imagine the prayer of Christ for his chosen ones. All had their faults, all could sin. How heartily our Lord would

have prayed for each, for Simon who would deny him, for almost all of them who would abandon him at the onset of his Passion, and for Judas Iscariot who would betray him. The Treasure of the world, Jesus Christ — Son of God made man and Redeemer of the world — was to be entrusted to them – including our two Apostles today, Simon and Jude. They would have a cup to drink, and almost all would drink it in the event. They would come through, receive the Spirit, give their lives for him, hand on the Church to the generations, and receive the crown.

Among the Twelve were Simon and Jude, whose feast day we celebrate today. Together with the others each had a glorious vocation – to be the direct companions and representatives of Jesus Christ the Son of God. They lived in his company day by day and grew gradually in the knowledge of him who was God himself and the face of the Father. They lived through the drama and the crash of their hopes with the Passion and Death of their Master, and then the superabundant joy of the Resurrection. They received the powerful Spirit of God at Pentecost, transforming them into paragons of intrepid faith, a faith that

took them to the nations to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ. The fact that we know so little of their lives before they were called by Christ and after he had ascended into heaven matters little. That is due to the accident of a lack of a recording of their deeds. After all, how much do we know of the details of St Joseph's life (apart from the little in the Gospels), and yet he is second to none after the Virgin Mary his spouse. Simon and Jude went on to lives of unremitting toil in their mission of proclaiming Christ and his redemption. As they are Apostles, we celebrate their day as a Feast Day in the Church's year because they were two of the foundation stones of the Church, Christ being the cornerstone. Whenever we think of our share in the life of Christ as it has come to us in the Sacraments and in the preaching and teaching of the word, we think of the unbroken apostolic succession back to the Apostles themselves – including Simon and Jude. Christ is in us – our hope of glory, and this is due to the ministry of the Church. The Church derives its spiritual power and authority from Christ, and for this we are indebted to the Apostles. All they passed on to us they drew from the revelation of Christ. This ought excite in us constant

gratitude to God and a profound sense of responsibility for the apostolic faith we are privileged to live by. We must pass on this divine life to others faithfully, such that what others receive through our testimony will be what the Apostles themselves passed on from Christ.

We each of us are part of this. We each of us have received the call to be personal friends of Jesus Christ — not as lone friends of his, but as members of his mighty Church, the Catholic Church of the ages, the Church that bears within itself the Kingdom which it unlocks for all who hear the word of Christ and respond. Let us each day seize the chance which this call offers us. It is the pearl of great price, the treasure in our field. That pearl is Christ. He is our life!

A Second Reflection: (Ephesians 2:19-22; Luke 6:12-19)

The Faith of the Apostles Today we think of two of the Twelve, Simon and Jude. We know hardly a thing about them. As they are Apostles, we celebrate their day as a Feast Day in the Church's year because they were two of the foundation stones of the Church, Christ being the cornerstone. Whenever we think of our share in the life of

Christ as it has come to us in the Sacraments and in the preaching and teaching of the word, we think of the unbroken apostolic succession back to the Apostles themselves. Christ is in us, and this is due to the ministry of the Church. The Church derives its spiritual power and authority from Christ, and for this we are indebted to the Apostles. All they passed on to us they drew from the revelation of Christ.

This ought excite in us constant gratitude to God and a profound sense of responsibility for the apostolic faith we are privileged to live by. We must pass on this divine life to others faithfully, such that what others receive through our testimony will be what the Apostles themselves passed on from Christ.



Solemnity of All Saints (November 1)

Entrance Antiphon Let us all rejoice in the Lord, as we celebrate the feast day in honour of all the Saints, at whose festival the Angels rejoice and praise the Son of God.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, by whose gift we venerate in one celebration the merits of all the Saints, bestow on us, we pray, through the prayers of so many intercessors, an abundance of the reconciliation with you for which we earnestly long. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Solemnity of All Saints (November 1) Today we celebrate the feast of all the unknown saints who are now in heaven. The Church reminds us that sanctity is within everyone's reach. Through the Communion of Saints we help one another achieve sanctity.

Scripture today: Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14; Psalm 24:1bc-6;

1 John 3:1-3;

Matthew 5:1-12a

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. (Matthew 5:1-12a)

The Christian Mind

Let us begin by situating our Gospel passage in its context in the Gospel of St Matthew. The first two chapters of Matthew narrate the ancestry, birth and infancy of Jesus of

Nazareth. He is the son of David, the son of Abraham, thoroughly of the Jewish race, and is the Messiah that was to come. Son as he was of Mary, it is Joseph her husband who receives the message from the Angel that the Child his wife bears is begotten in her of the Holy Spirit. He will save his people from their sins, and will be called *God-with-us*. The wise men from the East bear witness to his Messiahship, as do the shepherds who come with their news from heaven. But he is rejected, and must flee to Egypt. It is all a harbinger of what is to come. The scene shifts to the preaching of the prophet John, exhorting the people to prepare for the coming of the Lord by a baptism of repentance. A mighty one is coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John's ministry, briefly outlined in the chapter immediately following the infancy, passes away once he baptizes Jesus and passes the mantle to him. Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, goes into the desert to lock with Satan and begin his public ministry. He launches into his divine work, preaching, healing, summoning to follow him those who will be his Apostles. Matthew presents Jesus surrounded by future Apostles, being followed by a great

multitude of people from all parts, teaching, preaching, driving out demons, and above all drawing the attention of all to the Kingdom of God that is to be found in him. With both the multitudes and his disciples before him, at this point Matthew pauses to give us a substantial presentation of the teaching of Jesus Christ. It is the *Sermon on the Mount*, and he begins with the famous Beatitudes, the summary in maxim form of who it is who will be blessed with possession of the Kingdom of God. The blessed ones in this life are those who possess the Kingdom. They will be comforted, filled, and granted mercy. They will be counted as God's children, and will have a great reward in heaven.

The Sermon on the Mount is, together with St John's Last Supper discourse, the longest continuous account by Jesus Christ of his teaching. It consists of some 117 verses of teaching over a great range of topics such as apostolate, prayer, anger at others, purity, divorce, oaths, love for others, almsgiving, detachment from riches, dependence on God, and many other matters. It could be said to be a brief

compendium of the teaching of Jesus Christ on how we must live. Perhaps it was meant to be learned by heart, and Matthew had it conveniently together in one part of the Gospel scroll, at the commencement of our Lord's ministry. But at the beginning, he placed Christ's summary description of the *heart of the disciple*. He is poor in spirit. He mourns for the state of mankind and the world. He is not a man of anger and strife, but is meek. He hungers for justice and all that is right. He is merciful and pure in heart. He makes peace among men, and finds himself persecuted because of righteousness. He is reviled because of his adherence to the Person and doctrine of Jesus Christ. He rejoices that he is found worthy to suffer thus, because so it was with the prophets before him. This is a very different man from that of the world, and is the fulfilment of what the Old Testament pointed to, for the simple reason that the disciple of Jesus Christ thus described is a reflection of his Master. Our Lord's account of those who are truly blessed is a revelation of his own mind and heart. He is the one who synthesises in his own person the several aspects of authentic discipleship that he sets forth at the beginning of the Sermon on the

Mount. Doubtless Christ often repeated these simple descriptions to his disciples of the kind of person he expected them to be, but he himself was the quintessential model of it all. They looked on him, remembered him, contemplated him, as the Exemplar of all he said of Christian living. It was what St Paul would later refer to as the mind of Jesus Christ – *let this mind be in you, he would write, that was in Jesus Christ*. The Beatitudes describe the mind of Jesus Christ and what it is to put on that mind.

Today is the feast of all those now with Christ in heaven. They have attained the Kingdom definitively, finally, forever. Let us all our lives contemplate the Person of Jesus Christ, striving to know him and to imitate his mind, heart, soul and life. He himself is at the heart of the Kingdom he announced, described and inaugurated. By entering into union with him and by living his life, we enter and possess the Kingdom. Grand are the prospects of those who enter! An eternity of bliss awaits them, and we celebrate today those now there. On this

feast of all the saints, let us choose Jesus Christ as our Lord, now and forever.

A Second Reflection:

All the saints On this day the Church celebrates the feast of all the unknown saints who are now in heaven. Their purification from sin has passed, and they are holy, sanctified, totally in Christ, and are consequently with God and the angels and saints for ever. Their life is utter happiness, happiness without end. They continue their work for us in heaven. We also think of this life and its true meaning: it is a preparation for our meeting with God. God made us to know, love and serve him here on earth so as to see and enjoy him forever in heaven. This is life's meaning. A great psychiatrist of the twentieth century, Victor Frankl, wrote that the secret to happiness especially in the midst of difficulties and suffering, lies in having a sense of the meaning of life. This is a good point, but it is so important that we possess not just *any* meaning to life, but the *true* meaning of life. Well now, the Christian knows the true meaning of things because it has been

revealed to us by Christ, and taught to us by the Church. We have all been called to holiness in Christ. Every day takes us nearer to the moment of judgment, and we will be judged on the degree of love that fills our heart: love for God and love for our neighbour.

Let us pray today that we will be led on to seek sanctity wholeheartedly by the loving fulfilment of our God-given duties in life.



Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed

(November 2)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. 1 Thes 4: 14; 1 Cor 15:22 Just as Jesus died and has risen again, so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep; and as in Adam all die, so also in Christ will all be brought to life.

Collect Listen kindly to our prayers, O Lord, and, as our faith in your Son, raised from the dead, is deepened, so may our hope of resurrection for your departed servants also find new strength. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed (November 2) The Church, after celebrating the feast of All Saints, today prays for all who, in the purifying suffering of purgatory, await the day when they will join in their company. The celebration of the Mass, which re-enacts the sacrifice of Calvary, has always been the principal means by which the

Church fulfils the great commandment of charity toward the dead. We can also relieve their sufferings through our prayers, suffrages, and penances. Even after death, links with our fellow travellers are not broken.

Scripture today: Wisdom 3:1-9; Psalm 23:1-6;

Romans 5:5-11 or 6:3-9; John 6:37-40

Jesus said, All whom the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.” (John 6:37-40)

Holiness It would generally be accepted that the rock on which Protestantism rests is its twin doctrine of justification attained by *faith alone* and revelation transmitted in *Scripture alone*. In respect to the

former, Luther insisted that justification involves the mantle of Christ's merits enveloping the sinner, with God then gazing with delight on the sinner thus covered with the holiness of Christ. The sinner is justified by his act of faith in this saving attribution to him of Christ's merits. It is this *faith alone* that justifies. The sinner himself does not advance from being under the power of sin to personal holiness in his inner being. Rather, he remains in his sins. Christ his Redeemer substitutes for him such that, due to the goodness and plan of God, his sinful condition passes out of the sight of God and is clothed with the merits of Jesus Christ. The Catholic position is at a chasm from this – it insists that the generous, faithful, obedient Christian who is subject to the grace of God becomes progressively holy in his heart, soul and being. The saint is not just a person who entirely believes in the merits of Christ and that these merits have enveloped him as would a mantle or cloak, sinner though he remains. He is one who, by the power of God's grace, has become like unto Christ in his heroic virtue. In his heart he has been transformed in Christ. Now, a question that has often occurred to me is, what does the average person spontaneously think of this

matter? What is the natural way to think of, say, the Christian saint? Let us take Australia – it would be absurd to claim that it is a Catholic country. Many might say it is a Christian country – if so, it would have to be counted as a Protestant country. I would regard Australia as a secular country with a substratum of religion present in the dominant and public secularity. Be that as it may, one of the very interesting things about the canonization by Pope Benedict XVI of the Australian Mary MacKillop was the widespread celebrations of the event. The country rejoiced that one of its daughters was now *a saint*, venerated among the saints of the Church. The Australian Government, led by a self-professed atheist prime minister, sent a delegation to Rome for the great event. Special stamps were issued featuring the new saint, and there were many other facets to the widespread celebrations.

The point, though, is that the country rejoiced that Mary MacKillop was formally declared to be among history's truly holy persons. The population counted her as an *extremely good* person. She was holy in mind, heart, soul and in all her life. As the Australian

ambassador to the Holy See said in an interview on the ABC *Compass* program at the time, "Mary MacKillop was one hell-of-a-lady." She was not just a sinner like all other sinners, believing with exceptional belief in the imputation of Christ's merits to her. No, she had victoriously advanced along the road of Christian virtue, forgiving injuries with remarkable generosity and consistency, loving her enemies, embracing the Cross, serving those in need – she was a hero of inner goodness which showed itself in her life of charity. This was the hidden assumption in the widespread celebrations by Catholic and non-Catholic alike. It seems to me that the Christian doctrine on justification and sanctification as taught by the Catholic Church is a doctrine which, once proposed, nature accepts readily. The basic human and Christian task ahead is to become a saint – not to be canonized as such, nor to be recognized by others as a saint, but to become one. For the secularist, this will mean that one ought strive to be and to become good. The Christian knows that this natural call to goodness has a much higher dimension – to become holy with the holiness of Jesus Christ. Well then, today is the day in the year when

we think of all those who have gone from this life before us. If you think that all that needs to be done is to believe that Christ's merits are imputed to you, then of course whatever be your sins, you will enter Paradise instantly at death if you truly believe in this imputation. But no. God truly sanctifies us. *This is the will of God*, St Paul writes, *your sanctification*. If this sanctification is not complete at death, even though we are united to Christ in faith and living in his grace, then our sanctification will be effected by God nevertheless. He will truly sanctify us in our soul prior to our admission to his presence for ever. Thus there is Purgatory. After death, the soul in grace will be purified of personal sins and made holy.

There must be countless souls being mercifully purified by God in preparation for their admission into his presence for an eternity of bliss. The Church teaches that we can powerfully aid them by our prayers – especially by the Mass, by our penances and good works. We can hasten their purification and sanctification. In order to be admitted to the permanent presence of the all-holy God we must be holy

ourselves, and free of any stain of personal sin. If, regrettably, this has not been attained by the time of death, God in his mercy will effect it in the soul of the one who dies in grace. We shall have the blessing of Purgatory. We will be purified, and then there will be eternal bliss with God. Let us pray for all the Faithful Departed, on this day, and every day.

A Second Reflection: The Faithful Departed

Purification The Church, after rejoicing yesterday with our brothers and sisters who are in now heaven, today prays for all who, in the purifying suffering of Purgatory, await the day when they will join the company of the saints. The celebration of the Mass, which is the sacrifice of Calvary made present on our altars, has ever been for the Church the principal means of fulfilling for the sake of the dead the great commandment of charity. We can relieve their sufferings also through our prayers, suffrages, and penances. Even after death, links with our fellow travelers and brothers are not broken, for we believe in the doctrine of the communion of saints. Those in Purgatory are saved,

but they are undergoing a painful and loving purification from everything in them that is not the pure love of God. How painful that purification must be! We have only to imagine what it costs us in this life to be brought to a perfect love of God. Those in Purgatory can do nothing to hasten this process. They depend on the mercy of God and on the intercessory prayers of the Church's members in heaven and on earth.

Let us remember, too, that we ought aim to be purified of our sins in this life so as to go to God after death as speedily as possible. Let us pray, do penance and works of mercy, and try to gain indulgences both partial and plenary. Let us think of the last things that will come to us all, sooner or later.

A Third Reflection: The Souls in Purgatory

The Fires of Purgatory The faithful departed who are being purified in Purgatory know, and we also know, that sooner or later they will certainly be in heaven. This is not something we can say about

ourselves or anyone we know who is still living. No mother can say with certitude that any one of her children will certainly be saved. What a tragedy if one's child, through sinful personal choices, were to be lost forever! Precisely because of this uncertainty, it is most important to work hard for the spiritual life of everyone in the family. St Paul says we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling. But while the souls in Purgatory are assured of heaven in the way we cannot be, nevertheless they cannot merit further grace and sanctity. We can improve our stocks, for it is part and parcel of the gift of life. We can "improve ourselves" (let us say) by grace and our own co-operation with grace. Those in Purgatory can do nothing to improve but depend passively on God's action alone. Now, this purification from sin and its effects is very painful, whether in this life or in the next. It is especially painful in Purgatory, perhaps because it is by God's mercy absolutely unmitigated and unrelenting. The process of merciful purification is described in terms of fire. Figuratively speaking, they are on fire as gold is purified. The Church teaches that we can hasten their purification by our prayers, our Masses, our

penances, and by the Indulgences both plenary and partial that we can gain for them.

Imagine someone you know, someone close to you, a relative perhaps, a parent or an aunt, whose house was on fire and he or she inside. Would you not rush to her aid and do all you could to put that fire out? Of course there is a complete difference: for the fires of Purgatory *improve* the state of those who are there, they do not threaten them with death as does ordinary fire. They bring them closer to abundant life with God. Nevertheless, what are we doing about helping them, especially during November? Or let us take another image. A person has a condition, say a tumour which is not cancerous in itself but which, if left, will lead to cancer. So he has a major operation to remove the tumour. The operation is a real blessing for future life. In Purgatory, it is a purifying operation taking out what is there so as to lead to abundant life. But after the operation there is great pain, weakness and a long recuperation. He cannot cough without sharp pain. He might describe himself as on fire with pain. He is helped

along the way by various persons, yet still there is a lot of pain. The doctors and nurses and friends help in all sorts of ways to alleviate the pain and hasten the improvement. So, too, we can alleviate the souls in purgatory, and thus hasten their purification until they are utterly filled with the love of God and ready for an eternity with him.

Let us not neglect the souls in Purgatory, be they persons we have known, or the countless persons who have no one to pray for them. Let us make friends on the other side of the grave through our prayers, Masses and penances, so that when our turn comes we will have many friends to alleviate and hasten our purification and our entry into the presence of God.



Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome

(November 9)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Rev 21: 2 I saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

Or:

Cf. Rev 21: 3 Behold God's dwelling with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself with them will be their God.

Collect O God, who from living and chosen stones prepare an eternal dwelling for your majesty, increase in your Church the spirit of grace you have bestowed, so that by new growth your faithful people may build up the heavenly Jerusalem. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, who were pleased to call your Church the Bride, grant that the people that serves your name may revere you, love you and follow you, and may be led by you to attain your promises in heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Basilica of St. John Lateran (November 9) is the cathedral of Rome. It was built during Constantine's reign and was consecrated by Pope St. Sylvester in 324. This feast was later made a universal celebration in honour of the basilica called "the mother and mistress of all churches of Rome and the world" (*omnium urbis et orbis ecclesiarum mater et caput*) as a sign of love for and union with the See of Peter.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 47:1 2, 8 9, 12; : Psalm 46:2 3, 5 6, 8 9;

1 Corinthians 3:9c 11, 16 17; John 2:13 22

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market! His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then responded to him, "What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." They replied, "It has taken forty six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:13-22)

The Temple

In the history of religions there have always been shrines: places regarded as the special abode of the divine. Such places are sacred, and people have gone to them in order to encounter God and to seek blessings. Many examples of such locales could be given. The Black Stone of Mecca, so sacred to Islam, predates Mahomet as a kind of shrine. It has been suggested that the Black Stone may be a glass fragment from the impact of a fragmented meteorite some 6,000 years ago at Wabar, some 1,100 km east of Mecca. Its falling from the heavens may account for its ancient association with religion. In Revealed Religion, so strict in its monotheism, the pattern of hallowed places continues. The Temple of Jerusalem in our Lord's time was the heart-beat of the chosen people of God. Solomon had built a magnificent Temple close to a thousand years before, and when it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, it was built again many decades later. Centuries later, and just a few years before our Lord's birth, it was renovated magnificently by Herod the Great. We have our Lord's word for it that God dwelt there in an altogether special way, for he refers to it in our Gospel passage today as the house of his

Father. As a child he lingered in the Temple, and when found by his parents, stated that (according to one rendering) he had to be in his Father's house. The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had gone up to the Temple each year, doubtlessly full of faith in the divine presence there. We read that the prophetess Anna lived night and day in the Temple, in prayer and fasting. She lived in the presence of God, where God was solemnly worshipped. So the Temple of Jerusalem had been the locale of God's special presence on this earth for centuries. In our Gospel today, our Lord cleanses his Father's house of rampant irreverence, ordering all to "*Stop turning my Father's house into a market!*" He refers to the new Temple that is himself, in which would be offered the perfect sacrifice to his heavenly Father on the Cross. All would be invited to enter this new Temple and make it their abode.

And this is the great reality of worship now. The risen Jesus abides here on earth in his body the Church. If Christ the head of the Church referred to himself as the Temple, the Church is also his Temple for the Church is his body. In this Temple which is his body the

Church, Christ the Church's head abides as mankind's High Priest and Sacrifice. The sacrifice of Calvary, in which Christ offered himself to his heavenly Father on our behalf, is continually being made present in the celebration of the Eucharist. That is why the dedication of the Cathedral of a diocese is celebrated annually in that diocese. It is a day that honours the presence of Christ in his word and sacraments, especially the Eucharist, celebrated in the Cathedral. It is also the day when the diocese celebrates its reality as the local Church. It is the local Church, in which Christ our High Priest and Sacrifice abides, making present the worship he offered to the Father on the Cross, and continued now in heaven. But the Church which Christ founded is not, in the first instance, just the *local* Churches. It is the entire *communion* of local Churches considered as a single entity, Christ's Catholic Church founded on the rock of Peter to whom were given the Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is in this single universal Catholic Church that our High Priest abides, making present his Sacrifice to the Father on our behalf. It is to honour this *single communion in Christ* that is the Catholic Church, that we celebrate the dedication of the Cathedral of

the Successor of St Peter, the Cathedral of St John Lateran in Rome. In celebrating the dedication of *this* Cathedral, the Cathedral of the Bishop of Rome who is the chief pastor of the universal Church, we celebrate Christ's priestly and sacramental presence in the *universal* Church. We also celebrate the *universal communion* with the successor of St Peter which is a fundamental cornerstone of Christ's Catholic Church. All of these things we are reminded of as we think of Christ's response to the question of his authority. "*Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up*" (John 2:13-22).

Let us love Christ. He is our High Priest, and our Sacrifice. Let us love the Church. It is the body of Christ, and his Temple. He abides therein, and in the sacraments and the word, he gives himself to the Father and to us. Let us love each church wherein is present the Eucharistic Jesus, and wherein are celebrated the Sacraments and the word of God. Let us love the entire communion of the Church, symbolized by the dedication of the Basilica in Rome of St John

Lateran, the Cathedral of the Bishop of Rome, Successor of St Peter, and Vicar of Jesus Christ.

A Second Reflection:

The See of Rome

Today we celebrate the dedication of the basilica of St John Lateran. This cathedral church is of significance for the entire Catholic Church because it is the cathedral from which the successor of Peter exercises his ministry. It is because he is the bishop of Rome that he has universal jurisdiction and teaching authority, and this is because the bishop of Rome is the successor of St Peter. In and through his ministry, Christ ministers to his faithful. So in celebrating the dedication of this cathedral we renew our acceptance and appreciation of the apostolic, the hierarchical, and the Petrine constitution of the Church that Christ founded. But we also think of the ministry of sacrament and word which is carried on in this cathedral, and in every cathedral and Catholic church in the world. That is to say, we think of Christ himself giving his own Person to us, together with a share in his risen life and holiness. This he does in and through the

sacraments and the ministry of the word, and the cathedral is the locus and symbol of this presence and activity of the Lord.

So we celebrate in this feast day the very life of the Catholic Church age after age, including our own. Let us renew our faith in Christ and his Church, and resolve to unite ourselves to him in the Church of which he is the head.



Feast of St Andrew, the Apostle (November 30)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 4:18-19 Beside the Sea of Galilee, the Lord saw two brothers, Peter and Andrew, and he said to them: Come after me and I will make you fishers of men.

Collect We humbly implore your majesty, O Lord, that, just as the blessed Apostle Andrew was for your Church a preacher and pastor, so he may be for us a constant intercessor before you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Saint Andrew, Apostle (November 30) Born at Bethsaida, he was a disciple of John the Baptist before he became a follower of Christ, to whom he also brought his brother, Peter. According to tradition, he preached the Gospel in Greece and in the year 60 was crucified in Patras on an X-shaped cross. He is a patron saint of Russia and Scotland.

Scripture today: Romans 10:9-18; Psalm 18; Matthew 4:18-22

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men. At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-22)

Andrew There have been many dramatic religious conversions in the Church's history, just as there have been significant abandonments of religious faith. One might trace the history of Augustine's religious opinions and way of life. Amid them all he was enshrouded by the powerful and persistent prayers of his holy mother – and finally the moment came. He heard the voice of the Lord calling him, and due to the grace of God he was ready and disposed. A tremendous following of Jesus Christ ensued. One might think of the conversion of St Paul on

the road to Damascus – a completely different kind of conversion from that of Augustine. One might think of the great conversion of John Henry Newman – an entirely different kind of conversion again. At the heart of each was the necessity of *personal disposition*. On one occasion our Lord spoke of the Sower going out to sow his seed and of the varying results of his work. Some of the seed produced a harvest, and this depended on the quality of the soil. The good soil – those who received the word and “understood” it – produced some thirty, some sixty, some a hundredfold. Being “good soil”, then, is critical to the effect of the Word of God in the heart of any individual. This consideration is one of those which are prompted by our Gospel today (Matthew 4: 18-22) for the Feast of St Andrew. Matthew does not inform us of what the first chapter of John’s Gospel explains – that Andrew, before his meeting with Jesus Christ, had been a disciple of John the Baptist. I suspect that there is even more to it than this. We read in the *Acts of the Apostles* how Paul and his missionary companions would on occasion come across disciples of John the Baptist – they knew little of Jesus Christ and his teaching. Presumably

they had been with John for a while and had passed on. But Andrew was one of those who not only had been formed by him but had been told by him who the Messiah was – and had been prompted by John to follow Jesus. This suggests to me that Andrew (and his companion John) was a *choice* disciple of John the Baptist. *As soon as* John the Baptist indicated to Andrew and his brother that Jesus was the Lamb of God (John 1:35), Andrew (and John) followed Jesus, and made himself known to Jesus. What this indicates is a deep *disposition*, though *implicit*, to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The account in Matthew (4:18-22) of the call by Christ of Peter and Andrew, and James and John, refers to a later event back in Galilee after the sojourn in Judea with John the Baptist. Christ calls each of them while they are at work in their trade. Andrew (and his brother John) *were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.* The notable thing here is the *immediacy* with which they answered the call of Jesus to follow him. It was a form of

conversion, in the sense of being a further and more decisive step towards God, involving a leaving behind of many things that were part of his life – such as family and existing employment. Andrew was exceptionally good soil for such a “conversion”. There would be more “conversions” to follow in his life, such as a leaving behind of limited and mistaken notions of the Messiah and his mission. But the essential factor was a right moral disposition – illustrated in our Gospel text today by the *immediacy of his response* to the call of Christ to follow him. There is a further point to be noticed in the following of Jesus Christ, which Andrew embraced. It is that an essential element in the following of Jesus Christ was to join him in his mission. Andrew, having the *disposition* to follow Christ, was disposed to join Jesus in his mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God, present in the person of Christ. Andrew’s entire association with Jesus prior to the Passion was an association with his *mission*. That mission was, in essence, that of drawing others to Christ. When our Lord, now risen from the dead, joined his disciples on the mountain in Galilee, he gave them a *mission* – it was to go to the whole world and *make disciples* of all the nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28). This, then, is the greatest career one could have, and Andrew stands for it. But it is to be understood broadly – for not all are called to participate in this mission of Christ in the same way. All are called to be Christ’s disciples – the plumber, the doctor, the housewife and the mother. In these ordinary activities and callings, all are invited to be Christ’s disciples and to further his mission of bringing others to Christian discipleship. This is the greatest of callings, addressed to all.

But if it is to be heard and have its effect, there must be the *right disposition*. Deep within our hearts there must be the right starting points, the correct first principles and assumptions, basic viewpoints that are true. The ominous fact is that the heart of man – the seat of his awareness and perspective – can so easily be clouded. We must pray that prayer of the blind man: *Lord, that I may see!* We shall not be able to see if we do not have sight, and true sight in matters moral and religious is a quality of the heart. What did our Lord say of the heart? It was from the heart of man that evil flows, just as it is from his

heart that good comes. So we must pray to Christ for purity of heart, for it is the pure of heart who are able to see God. All this relates to the matter of *disposition*. We must strive to be *disposed from the heart* for God and his holy will. His will is that we be disciples of Christ and that our words and actions contribute to the reign of Jesus Christ in the hearts of men. All are called to be his disciples.



The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

(December 8)

Prayers today: I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul; for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation, and wrapped me in a mantle of justice, like a bride adorned with her jewels. (Isaiah 61:10)

Collect: O God, who by the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin prepared a worthy dwelling for your Son, grant, we pray, that, as you preserved her from every stain by virtue of the Death of your Son, which you foresaw, so, through her intercession, we, too, may be cleansed and admitted to your presence. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.

The Immaculate Conception (December 8) A feast called the Conception of Mary arose in the Eastern Church in the seventh century. It came to the West in the eighth century, and in the eleventh century it received its present name, the Immaculate Conception. In the eighteenth century it became a feast of the universal Church. In 1854

Pius IX gave the infallible statement: “The most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instant of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin.” It took time for this doctrine to develop as such. While many Fathers and Doctors of the Church considered Mary the greatest and holiest of the saints, they often had a theological difficulty in seeing Mary as sinless at her conception. Two Franciscans, William of Ware and Blessed John Duns Scotus, helped develop the theology. They point out that Mary’s Immaculate Conception enhances Jesus’ redemptive work. While others of the human race are cleansed from original sin after birth, in Mary Jesus’ work was so powerful as to preserve her from original sin at the outset.

Scripture today: Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Psalm 98:1, 2-3ab, 3cd-4;
Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was

Mary. The angel entered and said to her: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." When she heard this she was troubled at his words, and considered within herself what manner of salutation this was. And the angel said to her: "Fear not, Mary, for you have found grace with God. Behold you will conceive in thy womb and will bring forth a son; and you will call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of David his father. He will reign in the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I do not know man?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most High will overshadow you. And so the Holy One who will be born of you will be called the Son of God. Behold your cousin Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age and she who has been called barren is now in her sixth month, because nothing is impossible with God." Mary said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

The Sinless One

Let the mind range across the story of God's dealings with his people as presented in the Scriptures prior to the coming of the Messiah. Consider how God addresses his chosen ones: he commands. Observance of his commands leads to life. The first words he speaks to Adam after he places him in the Garden (Genesis 2:16) are words of command. You may eat from any tree but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eat this and you die. He gives commands to Noah to build the ark, and then commands him to enter it. He calls Abraham, commanding him to leave his country for the land he would show him. From the Burning Bush he commanded Moses to come no nearer and to remove his sandals. He is to go to Pharaoh and lead his people out of slavery. The Lord is God and, full of love for his chosen people, he intervenes to command. But notice the intervention of God in the life of the virgin Mary. We read that the Angel Gabriel came to her and said, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you! He came before her, saluting her with words of the highest praise. She is full of God's favour. God is well pleased with her. The nearest thing to this in the Scriptures is, I suggest, what the Father said

of the Son at his Transfiguration: in him I am well pleased. Of course, Jesus is the divine Son, while the virgin Mary is a mere creature. But how God exalts her in these words of praise! The angelic emissary accords her a signal honour and, as one who is full of grace himself — for he comes from the presence of God — implies that the one before him is far more so. She is loftier than he in grace and divine favour. God is totally with her: the Lord is with you! He sees her apprehension and hastens to encourage: Do not be afraid, Mary! You are in God's favour. There is no mention of sin here! She is wholly in God's favour. God is entirely with her. This is the new woman, one very different from the woman of the beginning who had been enticed by Satan to assume God's place, and who had been cast out of the Garden as a result. This is Satan's enemy. Her seed will crush his head.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary is a dogma of the Christian Faith. Declared by solemn definition by (the since beatified) Pope Pius IX in 1854, this doctrine teaches that it is

divinely revealed (though not explicitly stated in Scripture) that, by the future merits of her divine Son, Mary was preserved free from original sin. It is an instance of revealed doctrine, implicit in Scripture, emerging with absolute clarity in the Church's living Tradition and declared as such by the Church's teaching Authority. This doctrine is an example of the Catholic Church's teaching that revelation cannot be reduced and confined to what is explicitly and unmistakeably expressed in Scripture. What God has revealed is also transmitted in the life and tradition of the Church, which Christ founded and of which he is the living Head. The Church teaches that Mary received the full benefits of salvation from the instant of her conception. In her case these benefits far exceeded those received by the newly baptized Christian. The newly baptized is, at the instant of baptism, completely freed from the separation from God that original sin causes in our human nature. Our nature is in a state of alienation from communion with God. This communion is restored at our baptism. But our baptism does not take away the propensity to sin. It does not restore the original integrity of our moral and spiritual nature. By applying our wills resolutely and

depending on the grace of God, this deeply wounded nature can gradually be made holy. But in Mary's case, not only was her very nature placed in communion with God, but her nature began its existence whole. She did not begin life wounded by original sin. She was freed from the tendency to sin and from that instant her entire being began its life-long ascent to God in faith and love. This ascent never slackened, never faltered. It was never touched by the slightest stain of sin. This stupendous story of holiness began at the instant of her conception and was the greatest manifestation of the power of the redemption wrought by Christ on the Cross. Young maiden as she was, in the life of grace she towered above the Angel who addressed her.

Let us join the Angel and bow before her in admiration and salutation. She is the mother of the Saviour and by his gift and work she is full of grace. The Lord is with her. She has been given to each of Christ's disciples to be their mother. She is the new Eve, the new mother of all the living. Hail Mary! You who are full of grace! The

Lord is with you! Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death! Let us pray this prayer every day.

Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12)

Entrance Antiphon Rev 12:1 A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

Collect O God, Father of mercies, who placed your people under the singular protection of your Son's most holy Mother, grant that all who invoke the Blessed Virgin of Guadalupe, may seek with ever more lively faith the progress of peoples in the ways of justice and of peace. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Our Lady of Guadalupe (Mexico) (December 12) The feast in honour of Our Lady of Guadalupe goes back to the sixteenth century. Chronicles of that period tell us the story. A poor Indian named Cuauhtlatohuac was baptized and given the name Juan Diego. He was a 57-year-old widower and lived in a small village near Mexico City. On Saturday morning, December 9, 1531, he was on his

way to a nearby barrio to attend Mass in honour of Our Lady. He was walking by a hill called Tepeyac when he heard beautiful music like the warbling of birds. A radiant cloud appeared and within it a young Native American maiden dressed like an Aztec princess. The lady spoke to him in his own language and sent him to the bishop of Mexico, a Franciscan named Juan de Zumarraga. The bishop was to build a chapel in the place where the lady appeared. Eventually the bishop told Juan Diego to have the lady give him a sign. About this same time Juan Diego's uncle became seriously ill. This led poor Diego to try to avoid the lady. The lady found Diego, nevertheless, assured him that his uncle would recover and provided roses for Juan to carry to the bishop in his cape or tilma. When Juan Diego opened his tilma in the bishop's presence, the roses fell to the ground and the bishop sank to his knees. On Juan Diego's tilma appeared an image of Mary as she had appeared at the hill of Tepeyac. It was December 12, 1531.

The first apparition occurred on his way to Mass at sunrise on December 9, the feast of the Immaculate Conception at the time, Juan Diego heard singing on the hill known as Tepeyac. Then he heard a voice calling him: "Juanito, my dearest and most humble son, where are you going?" He answered her that he was going to attend Mass at Tlatilolco

She replied: "Know, know for sure, my dearest, littlest, and youngest son, that I am the perfect and ever Virgin Holy Mary, Mother of the God of truth through Whom everything lives, the Lord of all things near us, the Lord of heaven and earth. I want very much to have a little house built here for me, in which I will show Him, I will exalt Him and make Him manifest. I will give Him to the people in all my personal love, in my compassion, in my help, in my protection: because I am truly your merciful Mother, yours and all the people who live united in

this land and of all the other people of different ancestries, my lovers, who love me, those who seek me, those who trust in me. Here I will hear their weeping, their complaints and heal all their sorrows, hardships and sufferings. And to bring about what my compassionate and merciful concern is trying to achieve, you must go to the residence of the Bishop of Mexico and tell him that I sent you here to show him how strongly I wish him to build me a temple here on the plain; you will report to him exactly all you have seen, admired and what you have heard. Know for sure I will appreciate it very much, be grateful and will reward you. And you? You will deserve very much the reward I will give you for your fatigue, the work and trouble that my mission will cause you. Now my dearest son, you have heard my breath, my word; go now and put forth your best effort."

At their next meeting, Mary said: "Listen to me, my youngest and dearest son, know for sure that I do not lack servants and messengers to whom I can give the task of carrying out my words, who will carry out my will. But it is very necessary that you plead my cause and, with your help and through your mediation, that my will be fulfilled. My youngest and dearest son, I urge and firmly order you to go to the bishop again tomorrow. Tell him in my name and make him fully understand my intention that he start work on the chapel I'm requesting. Tell him again that I am the ever Virgin, Holy Mary, the Mother of God, who is sending you."

"That is fine, my youngest and dearest son; you will return here tomorrow so that you may take the sign he asked for. Then, he will believe and no longer doubt or be suspicious of you; and know, my dear son, I shall reward your care, work and fatigue in my behalf. Go now; tomorrow I shall be here waiting for you."

"What is happening, dearest and youngest of my sons? Where are you going? Where are you headed?"

"Listen, put it into your heart, my youngest and dearest son, that the thing that disturbs you, the thing that afflicts you, is nothing. Do not let your countenance, your heart be disturbed. Do not fear this sickness of your uncle or any other sickness, nor anything that is sharp or hurtful. Am I not here, I, who am your Mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need anything more? Let nothing else worry you, disturb you. Do not let your uncle's illness worry you, because he will not die now. You may be certain that he is already well."

At a further meeting, "Go up, my dearest son, to the top of the hill, to where you saw me and received my directions and you will find different kinds of flowers. Cut them, gather them, put them all together, then come down here and bring them before me."

"My youngest and dearest son, these different kinds of flowers are the proof, the sign that you will take to the Bishop. You will tell him from me that he is to see in them my desire, and therefore he is to carry out my wish, my will. And you, who are my messenger, in you I place my absolute trust. I strictly order you not to unfold your tilma or reveal its contents until you are in his presence. You will relate to him everything very carefully: how I sent you to the top of the hill to cut and gather flowers, all you saw and marveled at in order to convince the Governing Priest so that he will then do what lies within his responsibility so that my house of God which I requested will be made, will be built."

(from "Nican Mopohua: Original Account of Guadalupe,")

Scripture today: Zechariah 2:14-17 or Rev 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab;
Judith 13:18bcde, 19; Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end. How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin? The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of

God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May it be to me as you have said. Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Guadalupe It is generally recognized that the earliest extant account of Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared in 1545, fourteen years after the apparitions of December 9 to 12, 1531. Called *Nican Mopohua* because of the exact chronological order in which it relates the various phases of the apparitions, this text is considered a masterpiece of Nahuatl literature. It was written by the Indian scholar Antonio Valeriano, but unfortunately an original copy has not been found – that which we have was published in Nahuatl by Luis Lasso de la Vega in 1649. That said, let us recall the historical context of these apparitions. By the year 1531 (the year of the apparitions in Mexico), the cataclysm of the Protestant Reformation in Europe was under way. For instance, at the beginning of that year King Henry VIII had

been recognized as supreme head of the Church in England, following his schism from Rome. Some five months after Guadalupe St Thomas More resigned as Lord Chancellor of England. Some ten weeks before it, Huldrych Zwingli, the Swiss reformation leader, was killed at the Battle of Kappel. While reformers such as Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin at different points in their writings expressed what seem to be examples of a limited Marian piety, the Protestant emphasis on *sola scriptura*, *solus Christus*, *solī Deo gloria*, kept the honouring of Mary to a minimum. The gradual upshot of the Protestant religion among its followers was a virtual disappearance of devotion to Mary, for it was deemed to be a serious distraction from faith in Jesus Christ. The long and authoritative tradition of the Church was broadly rejected. In its place the Protestant Christian clung to his Bible as providing his sufficient, personal and direct access to revealed truth – although over the past half century this has begun to change. Now what we can note here is that at the very beginning of the evangelization of the twin continents of the Americas, the mother of Jesus Christ intervened to set the religious tone and to summon her little ones to

her. As it turned out, the North American continent would become Protestant in principle. Still, the apparitions and teaching of Mary at Guadalupe is of significance when seen in the context of the Protestant Reformation – her words to Saint Juan Diego being striking in their contradiction of its position. She reaffirms the Church’s teaching on the Mother of God, and on the role of the Church herself.

I have at various times heard Protestant speakers deny the Catholic (and Orthodox) doctrine that Mary is the Mother of God. Clearly, they are unaware of or disregard the teaching of the early Ecumenical Councils – and in particular, the Council of Ephesus in 431. They do not understand it, nor its importance. At Ephesus the use of *Theotokos* to designate Mary was formally affirmed. *Theotokos* is a compound of two Greek words, Θεός God, and τόκος childbirth. This translates as *God-bearer* or the one who gives *birth to the one who is God*. The one referred to here is Jesus. The view advocated by Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople was that Mary should be called *Christotokos*, meaning "Birth-giver of Christ". But this was to restrict

her role to being the mother of Christ's humanity only. This was seen by the Council as dividing Jesus into two persons, the human who was Son of Mary, and the divine who was not. In effect it eliminated the Incarnation. Of course, it must be understood that *Mother of God* has never been understood as referring to Mary as Mother of *God from eternity* — that is, as Mother of *God the Father* or of *God the Holy Trinity*. It refers to the birth of Jesus and stresses that he is the Son of God incarnate. Well then, let us notice what Our Lady said to Juan Diego in 1531, during the first apparition early in the morning of December 9. According to the early account, she said: "Know, know for sure, my dearest, littlest, and youngest son, that I am the perfect and ever Virgin Holy Mary, Mother of the God of truth through Whom everything lives, the Lord of all things near us, the Lord of heaven and earth. I want very much to have a little house built here for me, in which I will show Him, I will exalt Him and make Him manifest. I will give Him to the people in all my personal love, in my compassion, in my help, in my protection: because I am truly your merciful Mother, yours and all the people who live united in this land and of all the other

people of different ancestries, my lovers, who love me, those who seek me, those who trust in me. Here I will hear their weeping, their complaints and heal all their sorrows, hardships and sufferings.” So Mary is the Mother of God through whom all live. She is also *our* mother, a mother of mercy whom we are called to trust, love and seek, a mother who brings us consolation. She exalts God, makes him manifest and brings him to the people. She is the help and protection of Christians.

This last point is important and significant. At a further apparition, Mary said to St Juan Diego, “Listen, put it into your heart, my youngest and dearest son, that the thing that disturbs you, the thing that afflicts you, is nothing. Do not let your countenance, your heart be disturbed. Do not fear this sickness of your uncle or any other sickness, nor anything that is sharp or hurtful. Am I not here, I, who am your Mother?” But Mary is part of the Church, works within the Church, and requires that we seek permission of the Church: “You must go to the residence of the Bishop of Mexico and tell him that I sent you here to

show him how strongly I wish him to build me a temple here on the plain”. The Church’s doctrine on Mary the mother of Christ is wonderfully re-iterated to the humble Mexican Indian – who went on to live a holy life and is a canonized saint of the Church. Let us likewise place ourselves in the care of Mary the Mother of God.



Saint Stephen, the First Martyr (December 26)

Entrance Antiphon The gates of heaven were opened for blessed Stephen, who was found to be first among the number of the Martyrs and therefore is crowned triumphant in heaven.

Collect Grant, Lord, we pray, that we may imitate what we worship, and so learn to love even our enemies, for we celebrate the heavenly birthday of a man who knew how to pray even for his persecutors. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Stephen (December 26) All we know of Stephen is found in Acts of the Apostles, chapters six and seven. The Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to

the ministry of the word.” The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit.... (Acts 6:1-5) Acts says that Stephen was a man filled with grace and power, who worked great wonders among the people. Certain Jews, members of the Synagogue of Roman Freedmen, debated with Stephen but proved no match for the wisdom and spirit with which he spoke. They persuaded others to make the charge of blasphemy against him. He was seized and carried before the Sanhedrin. In his speech, Stephen recalled God's guidance through Israel's history, as well as Israel's idolatry and disobedience. He then claimed that his persecutors were showing this same spirit. "You always oppose the holy Spirit; you are just like your ancestors" (Acts 7:51b). His speech brought anger from the crowd. "But [Stephen], filled with the holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God....' They threw him out of the city, and began to stone him....As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus,

receive my spirit....Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:55-56, 58a, 59, 60b).

Scripture today: Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59; Ps. 31:3cd 4, 6, 8ab, 16bc, 17;

Matthew 10:17-22

Jesus said, Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:17-22)

Nature and Grace The Gift of Christ is the Holy Spirit. On rising from the dead, the first thing he did upon meeting his gathered Apostles

was to bestow upon them his Gift, the Holy Spirit. He breathed on them and said, *Receive the Holy Spirit*. With that, he entrusted them with a share in his mission: *As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you* (John 20:21). Ten days after his Ascension to the right hand of the Father, he and the Father sent the Holy Spirit to the infant Church. With that, the Church was born and launched in its mission. And so it is that the Scriptures clearly show that it is God who grants the increase. Now, there are those who, looking to God alone for the power to do any good that bears on salvation, stress the profound and hopeless depravity of fallen man. In this stress on the Fall of man they regard nature, natural capacities and the natural means of doing good, to be of relatively little value. They view grace to be everything, and nature to be in effect nothing. For the daily Christian life they place little emphasis on a judicious use of all natural means to attain godly goals. All the emphasis is on faith in God's grace, together with a neglect of, and suspicion against, working hard with all the human and natural means. Now, this is an important issue because if God means us to rely on him alone in such a way that nature is eclipsed in the process,

then it is to be expected that being calculatingly shrewd in one's use of natural means must interfere in his work. But if God means us to rely on him *and* to give due weight to natural means, then failing to give this weight will in its turn cripple the work of God. In our Gospel today our Lord warns his disciples that they will be harassed and persecuted. "*But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you*" (Matthew 10:17-22). The impression one *might* gain from this single text is that our Lord is inviting his disciples *not* to give thought, or to give *little* thought "*about what to say or how to say it*", because the "*Spirit of your Father will be speaking through you.*" But we can see from Scripture generally that our Lord does not mean to say that.

For example, elsewhere in the Gospel our Lord tells the parable of the sower going out to sow the seed. The sower is the Son of Man himself, and he is sowing the word of God. The emphasis of the parable is not on the quality of the seed, but on the soil that receives

it. In this parable it is the soil that makes all the difference to the degree of fruitfulness the seed will have. The fruit comes from the seed, but the degree of fruitfulness of the seed *depends on the quality of the soil that receives it*. In some instances – and the parable might be read as implying in *most* instances – the fruitfulness is very meagre, if not lacking altogether. After all, most of the instances mentioned in the parable – the path, the thorns, the rocky ground – are inimical to the seed. It is only the last, the good soil, which enables the seed to bear the harvest. Some of the seed in the good soil bears thirty fold, some of it bears sixty, some one hundred fold. But the soil and the surface of the ground is critical – and that is our part. We are the soil. It is clear from the parable that Christ means us to appreciate that the concrete steps *we take* to understand, accept and bear witness to the word are of critical importance in the work of redemption. That is to say, it is a serious and even tragic simplification simply to depend entirely on the grace of God *if* this is understood as *neglecting* the concrete and human steps *we* ought take to make it effective. Depending entirely on the help of God should not mean neglecting to work hard at the human factors in

the process. It does not mean acting as if God is to do everything. Both the Sower and the seed he plants require suitable soil to receive it. We must depend on God as the One who brings forth the fruit, while acting as if he depends on us to work to make this possible. For example, while praying for a psychological healing, the patient also should go to a good psychiatrist. We are not alone in our efforts – we have God to grant the increase. But neither is God alone – he has us as his instruments in the work he has given us to do. So then, when difficulties come in doing the work with which he has entrusted us, we must not worry *as if* all is dependent on ourselves alone. No, we do not worry because the Spirit of God will be with us. But it is clear that we must put our best foot forward for the work. St Paul *worked*, he claimed, harder than all the others. We must strive to be *good soil* for the Farmer, soil he can use to bring forth the fruit that will be his alone.

Let us begin every day by asking God to bless and give fruitfulness to our efforts to bear witness to him in our daily work,

knowing that all the fruit of it will come from him who is working and speaking in us. We are branches of the vine and the vine is Christ, with the Father the vinedresser. We are members of the body which is the Church, and the head is Christ. We depend totally on Christ to do the work in life which he has, by our vocation and circumstances, given us. Yet he has made himself dependent on us, for he has endowed us with freedom and the capacity to take our stand with him or otherwise. Nature depends on grace, but grace builds on, and in, and through nature, sanctifying it and transforming it into the likeness of God.



Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist (December 27)

Entrance Antiphon This is John, who reclined on the Lord's breast at supper, the blessed Apostle, to whom celestial secrets were revealed and who spread the words of life through all the world.

Or:

Sirach 15: 5 In the midst of the Church he opened his mouth, and the Lord filled him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding and clothed him in a robe of glory.

Collect O God, who through the blessed Apostle John have unlocked for us the secrets of your Word, grant, we pray, that we may grasp with proper understanding what he has so marvelously brought to our ears. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Saint John (December 27) Born in Bethsaida, a fisherman, he was called to follow Jesus while mending his nets. Known as the "beloved

disciple," John wrote the fourth Gospel, three Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. His passages on the pre-existence of the Word, who by his Incarnation became the light of the world and life of our souls, are among the finest of the New Testament. He is the evangelist of Christ's divinity and fraternal love. With James, his brother, and Simon Peter, he was present at the Lord's Transfiguration. At the Last Supper, he leans on the Master's breast. At the foot of the cross, Jesus entrusts his mother to his care. John's pure life kept him very close to Jesus and Mary. John was exiled to the island of Patmos under Emperor Domitian.

Scripture today: 1 John 1:1-4; Psalm 97:1-2, 5-6, 11-12;

John 20:1a and 2-8

Mary Magdalen came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him! So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at

the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (John 20: 2-8)

Reason Disposed by Love

At times it is thought that our recognition of the truth of religion, and in particular the truth of the Christian religion, depends on what we might call *proof* by way of "demonstration." A technical "demonstration" is akin to something like a mathematical or scientific proof that can be set down on paper and is secure against logical attack. If someone were to ask for a "proof" that energy equals mass multiplied by the speed of light squared, then this could be done by recourse to Einstein's famous mathematical *demonstration*. This proof or *demonstration* leads to a (mathematical) certitude and it compels the assent of the one who can follow it. But this is not the only way certitude is attained, and it is certainly

inappropriate to expect this kind of *demonstration* for, say, *religious* certitude. Some expect it to be "proved" to them that God exists, that Christ is God, that he rose from the dead, and the "proof" they demand is a technical "demonstration." In our Gospel today, Mary Magdalen comes running to Simon Peter and the disciple Jesus loved, and tells them that people have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and that they do not know where his body is. The tomb is empty and the body is gone. That is the stark fact, and, interestingly, *no one* seems to have disputed the empty tomb. But that he rose from the dead, is a further step and it required the readiness to believe. We read in the Gospel of St Matthew, that (in some sense) the resurrection was reported to the chief priests and elders by the tomb guards. From these elders there then circulated the story that the body had been spirited away by his disciples (Matthew 28:1-5). The elders were *not disposed* to believe. Islam makes the gratuitous assertion that Jesus did not actually die at all. He swooned on the cross and revived in the cool of the tomb. Other Muslims have proposed that someone who looked like Jesus died on the cross, but not he. They, of course, are not disposed to

believe and this is how they account for the empty tomb, and in particular the resurrection. For the acceptance of religious truth a readiness is required.

Peter and John set out and they run. It is evident that they are filled with love for their Master who has died and who has left an unspeakable void in their hearts. It is now early on the third day since his awful death. But now his body has gone! They run and run hard, with John the younger outstripping the leader and arriving at the tomb first. He looks in *"at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed"* (John 20: 2-8). All that was there were the cloths. The tomb was empty. Something about the situation, be it the special arrangement of the burial linen and the cloth covering Christ's head, or some other

factor – something there about the empty tomb indicated that Christ had risen. We read that "*He saw and he believed.*" This faith must have been but a dawning perception, only a beginning of the certitude that would be attained later on that joyful Easter Sunday when they would meet the risen Jesus. After all, we read elsewhere in the Gospels of the difficulty the disciples had, during the day, in accepting reports of him as risen. Nevertheless, we read that when "he saw" the empty tomb, in some sense "he believed." It reminds us that the certitude that is involved in religious faith, in faith in the risen Jesus, involves more than a mere "demonstration." Reason needs to be informed with love. If there is no love for the Person of Jesus, then the indications of the true situation (which from strict logic may seem to be inconclusive) will not be seized upon by the reason and comprehended. If there is no love for God then the indications in creation for his existence will probably not persuade the reason. This "love" that disposes the mind for belief is a moral love, involving a good life. It is the person who wants to be good and who is disposed to love Christ and God who will perceive the force of the indications about him. In a word, one must be morally disposed

for religious faith. One must have a readiness to believe if religious truth is to be attained. It is not a matter of *mere demonstration*.

Let us be like John the Evangelist whose feast day we celebrate today. He loved Christ with an ardent love and it was this love that enabled him quickly to perceive the meaning of the empty tomb. Let us cultivate and nourish a moral love in our lives – love for God, love for Christ, love for neighbour. This will nourish our readiness for faith, and our faith in its turn will then remain the foundation for love. On the basis of faith we are able to love Christ, but if our love wanes, our faith will be at serious risk and vulnerable to threats. Let the love and faith of St John be our example.



Holy Innocents, Martyrs (December 28)

Entrance Antiphon The innocents were slaughtered as infants for Christ; spotless, they follow the Lamb and sing for ever: Glory to you, O Lord.

Collect O God, whom the Holy Innocents confessed and proclaimed on this day, not by speaking but by dying, grant, we pray, that the faith in you which we confess with our lips may also speak through our manner of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Holy Innocents (28th December): Herod "the Great," king of Judea, was unpopular with his people because of his connections with the Romans and his religious indifference. Hence he was insecure and fearful of any threat to his throne. He was a master politician and a tyrant capable of extreme brutality. He killed his wife, his brother and his sister's two husbands, to name only a few. Matthew 2:1 18 tells this

story: Herod was "greatly troubled" when astrologers from the east came asking the whereabouts of "the newborn king of the Jews," whose star they had seen. They were told that the Jewish Scriptures named Bethlehem as the place where the Messiah would be born. Herod cunningly told them to report back to him so that he could also "do him homage." They found Jesus, offered him their gifts and, warned by an angel, avoided Herod on their way home. Jesus escaped to Egypt. Herod became furious and "ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under." The horror of the massacre and the devastation of the mothers and fathers led Matthew to quote Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah,/sobbing and loud lamentation;/Rachel weeping for her children..." (Matthew 2:18). Rachel was the wife of Jacob/Israel. She is pictured as weeping at the place where the Israelites were herded together by the conquering Assyrians for their march into captivity. "Lord, you give us life even before we understand" (Prayer over the Gifts).

Scripture today: 1 John 1:5 2:2; Psalm 124:2-3, 4-5, 7cd 8;

Matthew 2:13-18

When the Wise Men had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: Out of Egypt I called my son. When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more. (Matthew 2: 13-18)

Bearing Witness Bethlehem was a tiny village in one of the world's backwaters. What happened there would not have caused so much as a ripple on the general scene of the era. Yet unbeknown to the world a momentous event had happened: In that obscure locality God had quietly become man and was being nurtured as a tiny infant. He and his humble parents had been visited by representatives from the East and they, having honoured him as a great King, had departed. These Magi had inquired of him from Jerusalem and from the wily King Herod, but Herod had heard no more from them. Thereupon Herod hatched an effective plan to destroy this infant Messiah who would doubtless threaten his future dynasty. So, very quietly his soldiers arrived at the village, the nation knowing nothing of what was afoot. It may have been a party of ten or twenty – who knows! Swiftly, efficiently, quietly, the settlement was searched by the unexpected henchmen. Each home of the village and its surrounds was visited, entered and examined. Without more ado, home by home the boys under two years of age were dispatched, leaving a pall of lifelong sorrow over various families of Bethlehem. But the eagle had flown!

Not long before their terrible arrival – perhaps in the nick of time – Joseph was roused by an angel in a dream, and with the Child and his holy mother had fled to Egypt. King Herod thought he had snuffed out yet another threat, but the King of kings had been preserved. But what terrible harm had been done! Innocents had been quietly slaughtered and profound sorrow had suddenly descended upon obscure and helpless families. Where was God? What was he doing? Why did he allow this? Was he not capable of preventing such a deed? Look at the power of his hand. He had led the Magi from the East to the Child by a star. That was a prodigy in itself. He had thwarted Herod firstly by directing the Magi not to return to him to inform him of the Child, and secondly he had warned Joseph of the terrible threat that was so near. He had also told Joseph exactly where he was to go: he was to go beyond reach into Egypt. He could certainly have saved these Innocents and their unsuspecting families from such an evil. But he did not. He did not save them from their gruesome death.

It can be very difficult knowing what to make of this. That is to say, it can be very difficult understanding the plan of God, for often his ways seem to be inscrutable. He saves one, but not another. He heals one, but not another. He accords the wishes of one, but not another – so it seems. Our Innocents of today's Feast died because of hatred for Christ, and the Christ child was spared. We do not know why in the divine plan this terrible attack on innocent life was allowed, but till the end of time their unknowing sacrifice will be honoured by the Church. They are counted as "martyrs", which is to say, as "witnesses" to the absolute necessity of Christ and his saving mission. The divine imperative was that the Child must escape. Their deaths at the hand of Herod manifested that Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, the One whom Evil fears as its Conqueror. They show that what matters in life is the Person of Jesus, and that our lives should serve to honour and glorify him. Whether we live or die, whether our success is great or meagre, whether our lives are counted as fortunate or not, what matters is that they bear witness to the truth and the glory of Jesus. If in the last analysis it will be said that Jesus Christ was honoured and

glorified by my brief and poor life, then in all its poverty it will have attained its true and noble end. What would these Innocents have been if they had been preserved from such an evil as suddenly struck them? They would have grown up and lived out their lives as absolutely unknown villagers, lost in the total obscurity of history. But instead, for all eternity they will be counted as Martyrs – "Witnesses" to Christ – though uncomprehending at the time. By the decree of God their lives suddenly received a singular grandeur. The evil was allowed and the saving mission of the Redeemer proceeded. Let us live our lives striving to fulfil God's will as it seems to be indicated. If mishaps, tragedy and disappointment come our way despite our prayers and appeals, the Holy Innocents show us that God has his plan for us. In all its difficulty and obscurity, our ordinary life will attain its grandeur.

If God is to be honoured and glorified by my life, there is one way to this and one way only. His will be done on earth as it is done in heaven. May the holy will of God be done! As our Lord prayed in the Garden, Father, take this cup from me – but not as I will, only as you

will. Mysteriously, suffering, deprivation and even death can be part of the great and wondrously effective plan of God. The Holy Innocents teach us that all that God does or deliberately allows will play their part in Christ's work of redemption and sanctification. What matters is that we actively do and actively accept his will.



Special

Occasions

Australia Day (January 26)

Entrance Antiphon I will praise you, Lord, among the peoples, among the nations sing psalms to you, for your mercy reaches to the heavens, and your truth to the skies.

Collect Grant, we pray, O Lord our God, that as the Cross shines in our southern skies, so may Christ being light to our nation, to its peoples old and new, and by saving grace, transform our lives. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Australia Day (January 26 On Australia Day the citizens come together as a nation to celebrate the nation, the culture and in general, being Australian. It is the day to reflect on what has been achieved and the blessings that are the source of gratitude and national pride. It is the day for all to re commit themselves to making Australia an even better place for the future. Australia Day, 26 January, is the anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet of 11 convict ships from Great Britain, and the raising of the Union Jack at Sydney Cove by its commander Captain Arthur Phillip, in 1788. Though 26 January marks this specific event, Australia Day celebrations reflect contemporary Australia: its diverse society and landscape, its remarkable achievements and its future. It is an opportunity to reflect on the nation's history, and to consider how

Australia can be made a better place in future. It is also a day to remember the indigenous Australians whom the arrivals of 1788 dispossessed – and to resolve to serve them justly.

Scripture today: Isaiah 32:15-18; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 or
Romans 12:9-13; Matthew 5:1-12

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice

and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:1-12)

Day of the Nation Today we celebrate a National Day, a day on which the whole nation celebrates the blessing that is one's own country and nation. All things have their origin in God. He sustains all things in existence, which is to say that all things are the continual gift of God our common Father. The air we breathe, the natural resources we use, the material and cultural benefits we enjoy, inasmuch as they exist at all are the constant gift of God the Creator. So while a secular nation may celebrate a National Day without formal and public reference to God, its religious citizens will see it as the most natural thing in the world to acknowledge God as being at the centre of any such celebration. The Church will manifest and will lead the religious celebration of a National Day. What, then, is to be said of a National Day? At least this must be said, that at the forefront is the thought of development. That is to say, a country looks back on its history from the perspective of the

present, and thinks of the development that has taken place from its beginnings. By whatever processes, just or unjust, a country passed into the hands of its present citizens at some point and its development was pursued. The land was worked, laws were promulgated, businesses established, schools begun. The population grew and the nation gathered its momentum. There were bright spots in the development and there were many dark spots. At the heart of this process was the moral life of the nation and in this, successes will be seen as well as failures. Now, in the modern era, a strong tendency will be to look on development, including moral development, as earth-bound. That is to say, the nation will tend to be seen by its citizens as having purely earthly, temporal and empirical goals. The country will be understood to have truly developed if it attains a high degree of economic, political, social and, say, environmental development. Its perspective will be secular, and its notion of moral development will likewise be secular — which in general will be utilitarian and happiness-oriented. That is to say, the notion of development will not be an *integral* one, involving the whole man and every man.

Fundamentally, the temptation will be to look on past, present and future development of oneself and one's country in a way that eclipses its fundamental reference point: *God*. God is the central element of true development because man's fundamental vocation is to communion with God. All his other responsibilities have God and his will as their reference point. The most fundamental development for every man and woman is the development of love for God, and in God, love for one's fellow man. If this is the case for the individual and the individual family, it is also the case for a nation. But so deeply entrenched is the assumption that God is just a private opinion. Any public acknowledgement of God is (almost instinctively) assumed to be in poor taste. Here I am especially speaking of a country such as Australia, which is especially secular in its public and civic life. Its foundations as a nation — which its National Day, Australia Day, celebrates — were profoundly secular, even though there were strong religious elements present. It began as a barracks and as a gaol. Wave after wave of convicts were unloaded to its shores, and — to take but one example of the lack of religion — it was decades before the

Catholic Church was allowed to have a formal, enduring, visible and official presence serving its adherents. Despite powerful religious currents coursing through its life, it became a secular nation in a public sense. The constant danger remains that the development of both the individual and the nation will be seen as a temporal, earthly and empirical matter. For this reason, our Gospel today reminds us of the central importance of *God* and *life in God*. The true blessings are those which our Lord sets forth in the beatitudes, and according as the individual, the family and the nation approaches life according to the beatitudes, so will the true blessings of life be gained. There is this to be said, also. The secular assumption that keeps God out of view is a very active and aggressive one. In particular, it actively keeps *Christ* out of view. It will not tolerate the proposition that Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, possessing all authority.

The National Day of any country is the opportunity for the Christian and for all the Church's children to raise the question of what true development is. It is not just the development of those blessings

that relate simply to this life. It must be an *integral* development of the whole man and for every man. What is it that ensures this development? Above all, it is acceptance of and faith in the Person of Jesus Christ. We must enter into communion with him, accept his revealed truth and guide our lives in accord with it. That will bring integral development, the development God wishes every person and every nation to seek. This is the path to true grandeur.



**Day of the Fallen (For example ANZAC Day in Australia,
April 25)**

Entrance Antiphon Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Let them rest from their labours, for their good deeds go with them.

Collect Almighty everlasting God, who sent your Son to die that we might live, grant, we pray, eternal rest, to those who gave themselves in service and sacrifice for their country. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

ANZAC Day (April 25) is a national day of remembrance in Australia and New Zealand, and is commemorated by both countries on 25 April every year to honour members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) who fought at Gallipoli in Turkey during World War I. It now more broadly commemorates all those who died and served in military operations for their countries in all wars. Anzac Day is also observed in the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tonga.

Scripture today: Many suggested readings. The Gospel may be John 12:23-28 or John 14:23-29

Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honour whoever serves me. "I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? ' Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." (John 12:23-28)

The Fallen One of the most striking things about life is *death*. The flowers bloom into beautiful displays, and then fade, wither and die into an unsightly scrap. Animals of power and beauty, the object of enthralling nature documentaries, end in a lifeless heap only to crumble

to slowly deteriorating skeletons. We take all this for granted because it is the constant norm in our changing world. The tragic wonder of it rarely occurs to us – why is there death anyway? Why is life subject to death? The issue is particularly stark when we come to mankind. As the psalmist says, God has made man *little less than God* (Ps. 8), yet dust and ashes is his end. If ever there is a mystery as to the meaning of things (if it has any meaning at all), it is this. This is surely one of the signal achievements of Jesus Christ as an historical figure, that he has conferred an extraordinary meaning on death. In June of 2015, the Shroud of Turin was made available for public veneration. Coincidentally an Italian police department, which specializes in deducing from photographs the aging processes of criminals, set to work on the Face of the Shroud. It produced a series of computer generated pictures of that Holy Face back from its depiction on the Shroud to what it may have looked like when aged 12. It showed the features of the boy Jesus. As I gazed on it I could not help but think of the extraordinary mission and destiny of that boy. His mission would be accomplished principally by his death. He would die as does

every man and woman, but his death would transform the meaning and possibilities of death. Due to him, death would now not be a universal descent into apparent darkness, but a door for all into radiant light. It would be like *a grain of wheat (which) falls to the ground and dies. When it dies, it produces much fruit.* The surest way for this to happen in the life of any particular individual is for that individual *to choose* to live in union with Jesus Christ, and so to die in union with him. But this is surely not the extent of the matter, for in becoming man, the Son of God mysteriously united himself to every man in some way. God became a Brother to all, even if they did not know it. The whole world has benefited by the Incarnation, and a new divine impulse has entered into the blood stream of humanity without it knowing this. Death spread through the human race through sin, but divine grace has entered its course much more so through the obedience of Jesus Christ.

Because of the Incarnation and the consequent connection of the Son of God with every man and woman, can we not hope that not only the *life* of every man is connected with Jesus Christ, but also his

death? I do not speak of those who *choose to separate themselves* from Jesus Christ with knowledge and intent. In speaking of Judas and of the Twelve, Christ said that “none of them is lost but the son of perdition” (John 17: 12). So a person will be lost at death if he truly *chooses* to separate himself from Christ and his teaching. What this might involve in an individual case will be known only to God. But in the case of the generality of men and women in their obscurity and struggles, broadly trying to get their lives right and live properly, Jesus Christ by his Incarnation and Death has united himself to them. This constitutes the *Christian* hope for *all* who die, even if *they themselves* are unaware that in this lies their *true* hope. This is the case for the vast numbers in every age who have lost their lives either for good purpose or futilely *in war*. Let us think of the innumerable armed conflicts of the twentieth century, including several absolutely major wars (eg., World War I and II, Korean and Vietnam Wars) involving great numbers of obscure and ordinary folk. Every century has its many wars, quite apart from the great loss of human life caused by other factors, natural and man-made. Is all this just some mindless process in which precious

individuals, who are known and loved by their families, are just swept away into the oblivion of history without any consequence or meaning? No – for there is this, that God the Son became man and in doing so he united himself in some way to every human being. Further, he died for every human being, including those who do not know him or have not reached the point of caring about him. He is somehow united to them such that at the Judgement he will say to those on his right and his left that *whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me* (Matthew 25). If Jesus Christ the Son of God and Redeemer of man is somehow united to the poor young man who may seem to count for little in the scheme of things, then his being blown to bits by a war shell has true meaning in the ultimate scheme of things. This is so because, being truly connected to Christ by virtue of the Incarnation, his death is also caught up in the death of Christ too. And Christ's death was the most significant thing for the universe.

The Church sends her clergy into the armed forces and into armed conflict accompanying those forces in order to help all the

players to be conscious of the great Good News that the Son of God has united himself to every man and woman by virtue of his Incarnation, Death and Resurrection. With this gratuitous act of divine mercy, there comes the call to repent and believe this Gospel. It applies to all, but it has a special urgency for those in imminent and mortal danger. For those who do not deliberately and knowingly reject this call, we may confidently hope that their deaths in the line of duty will be caught up in the blessings that have flowed to all humanity from the saving and atoning death of Jesus Christ. Thus will the fallen share in the blessings of the Redemption, and thus will their deaths in some measure advance the life of man.



Vocations Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Easter)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 33 (32):5-6 The merciful love of the Lord
fills the earth; by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, lead us to a share in the joys of heaven, so that the humble flock may reach where the brave Shepherd has gone before. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 13:14.43-52; Psalm 99;
Apocalypse 7: 9.14-17; John 10:27-30

Jesus said to the Jews, My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (John 10: 27-30)

Vocations There is a widespread need in society for advice and guidance. In the world of commerce and industry there are numerous kinds of consultants – management, personnel, even chaplaincies. In the general community there are psychiatrists, psychologists, marriage counsellors. Professional and non-professional guidance is everywhere and serves a tremendous human need. But who is the greatest guide of all? The Guide of all mankind is Christ who described himself as the Good Shepherd. In the days of our Lord, a shepherd did not drive his sheep ahead of him with dogs and vehicles. Our Lord on various occasions spoke of himself as the Good Shepherd. As we read in the Gospel, the sheep *hear his voice and follow him*. He guided his sheep by calling and leading them. In the Gospel of St John our Lord also says that he is the Sheep-gate, the gate into the fold. In calling himself the Gate he allows for no other gate at all. There is only one gate, and he is that gate. *'All others who came before me,' he says, 'are thieves and marauders.'* That is to say, unless we pass through this gate, which is Jesus himself, we shall not be safe from deadly attacks, nor will we ever gain access to the pasture of eternal life. But if souls are to pass

through this gate, there must be shepherds to guide them through it. And so we think of Christ's words, we think of the need of shepherds for Christ's sheep. First and foremost these are the ordained priests, led by the Church's chief pastor the successor of Peter, and the bishops united with him. A sheep without a shepherd may never get to the gate and pass through it. If he does, it may be the luckiest thing of all. There is, therefore, always the need for more priests. While some parts of the Church are worse off in this respect than others, everywhere there is the need of more priests, so that more and more people will be led through the gate which is Christ.

If there are to be more priests and more who shepherd the sheep by their words and example of total commitment to Christ, what must be done? Vocations to the priesthood and religious life depend considerably on the religious formation that is given to the young in their own families. The Church teaches that every home has the vocation to be a domestic church, where Christ abides. Pope Pius XII said that if mothers and fathers are giving an example of true Christian

virtue, their families will be the first seminaries and the first religious novitiates. St Therese of Lisieux came from a family of several daughters, all of whom became Religious. In the case of that family, the parents have both been canonized. Sadly, very often the parents of children do not want any of their children to be priests or religious, and do nothing to foster such a thought in the minds of their children. Pope Pius XII once said that parents should put aside their fears in this matter and by daily example of Christian life attempt to bring about this greatest honour they could ever possess. Our Lord wants all who love the Church to increase vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life by prayer, holiness of life and fidelity to the Church's teaching. If parents respect and love the priesthood and impart this respect and love to their children, vocations will flourish. Children will be open to a vocation and if they are not granted one, they will place high value on the children's own children being granted one. But if parents have little respect for the priesthood, children will grow up with the same attitude, and will scarcely value a vocation should God grant them one. The

priesthood is a high vocation, and this thought is what every parent ought impart to their children.

Let us pray for vocations to the priesthood. Every such vocation, if lived in fidelity, is a jewel in the sight of God, and an incalculable source of spiritual good, for the priest by his ordination is an *alter Christus*, another Christ.



World Communications Day (Sunday Before Pentecost)

World Communications Day, the only worldwide celebration called for by the Second Vatican Council (“Inter Mirifica”, 1963), is marked in most countries, on the recommendation of the bishops of the world, on the Sunday before Pentecost. The Holy Father's Message for World Communications Day is traditionally published in conjunction with the Memorial of St. Francis de Sales, patron of writers (January 24).

(Entrance Antiphon, Collect and Scripture readings for the Sunday on which this celebration falls)

The Media On World Communications Day we especially think of the Church's mission of bringing this or that aspect of the truth of Christ to others *through the media*. Christ said that we are to proclaim him from the housetops. In all cultures and at all times people ask the same basic questions about the meaning of life, and in every age the Church offers the one ultimate answer: and the answer is the Person of Christ. And so we, as members of the Church, should be deeply

interested in the world of communications and the messages that are being transmitted by means of them. It is Christ who is the way, the truth and the life for man, and we should exercise our influence as Christians in the world to ensure that the mass media do not impede, but indeed serve this great truth. In 2004, Pope John Paul II made the following point in his Message for World Communications Day. Commenting on a notion which governs much of the media, he wrote, *"The world of the media can sometimes seem indifferent and even hostile to Christian faith and morality. This is partly because the media are deeply influenced by the notion that the only absolute truth is that there are no absolute truths, or that, if there were, they would be inaccessible to human reason, and are therefore irrelevant. In such a view of things, what matters is not the truth but the "story". And so if something is newsworthy or if it entertains, the temptation is to set aside the question of its truth."* The pope continued *"Yet the media also offers unique opportunities for bringing the truth of Christ to all."* And so we must be acutely aware of the power and the possibilities for good and for evil of the media, whether radio, press, and television. There is

the all-pervasive Internet, and other means of mass communication will come. When Pope Paul VI visited Australia at the end of 1970, he addressed the journalists. He said to them that they were world power number one. He was implying that they must be aware of their power and influence, and use it responsibly. Time and time again many have observed how much of a link there is between the entertainment industry, the media, the Internet, and violence and sexual perversion. As we think back to Nazi Germany, we could ask how could a nation come to accept what was done with so much violence by its Nazi leaders. One reason was the capturing of the media by the Nazis, and using it to desensitise the conscience of a nation.

If we are not alert to the influence and power of the various forms of the media, we shall be rendering ourselves vulnerable to its insidious influences. We can become insensitive and accepting of moral evil. The media can influence just by being viewed, read and heard. Images and propositions can lodge in the imagination, remain unevaluated, and gradually silently accepted. So, good things should be

encouraged, and bad things strongly resisted. The good things may well harmonise with and pave the way for the truth of Christ. They can be watched and sponsored and encouraged. But the presence of bad things must be unmasked and subjected to the scrutiny of the light of Christ and right reason. Especially significant in any society and in a media grounded in secularism are the powerful assumptions which drive it. Standards of private morality, sexual values and behaviour, abortion, pornography and contraception are assumed by many to be matters pertaining solely to the individual and private conscience and so to the individual's right to determine. It is commonly assumed that such matters are nobody else's business. This is a powerful and hidden assumption. But moral values are not just private matters, for they contribute to public and social culture and so form the values of others, indeed the values of a society. The values of society easily become the values of numerous individuals. Take one instance of a supposedly private matter: the availability of pornography on the Internet. It can be watched at length at home and no one else might know. Not only must every Christian have nothing to do with such websites because of the

massive spiritual harm viewing them can cause one's whole psyche and spiritual life, but they are to be vigorously resisted in the public arena too. They drag societies, as we might say, down the drain. Years ago the great Internet company Yahoo significantly reduced the pornography available at that point on its websites because of pressure coming from customers. It was an instance of what public and private pressure can do to rid the Internet, television, and other media, of such and similar plagues. The same applies to the portrayal of various forms of violence. They create or contaminate whole cultures. Values become accepted and society is profoundly changed.

Let us resolve to put on the mind of Christ in everything, and to shape all things according to his glorious, divine and wonderfully human mind – assumed by him who was a divine Person. As St Paul writes, *let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*. Let us use the media and shape the media in such a fashion that God will ever be honoured and glorified.



Indigenous People's Sunday (First Sunday of July)

(Entrance Antiphon, Collect and Scripture Readings are those of the Sunday, determined by the Bishops of the country, on which this celebration falls)

For the purposes of offering a reflection, let us take the following Gospel:

At that time Jesus said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:25-30)

The Indigenous Within the vast sea of humanity, which is entirely replaced century after century, there are many powerful forces shaping mankind. Among the most powerful is *culture*. How are we to define the *culture* of a man or woman or of a society? Broadly, culture is the *intellectual and mental* character of an individual or society. This is manifested in language, literature, myth, story, ritual, custom and ways of life. “Culture” is a very broad concept but at its core it refers to ways of *thought* as this is expressed in myriads of forms. It is plain that if one despises the way a society thinks, one is despising that society and its members. A long-standing culture will have its achievements and its failures, its lights and its shadows and there can be some shadows which are so bad as to dominate the assessment one must make of it. For instance, the ritual sacrifice of human beings was so extensive in Aztec life as to be an immense blot on its record. But the same applies to sophisticated Western culture: there are strengths and most serious weaknesses. But our subject here is the *indigenous* cultures of the world. The manifest danger is that they will fail to gain the respect and support of the sophisticated and powerful, with the result that the

indigenous will languish and suffer, perhaps greatly. Where do we begin in this matter? We begin by understanding clearly that all, including the least, are our brothers and sisters in the one human family under God. All have an equal dignity before God. We then ought strive to be aware of the strengths and possibilities of indigenous cultures – while having one’s eyes wide open to their problematic features. For the average non-indigenous person, a good start is to take some interest in at least *one* indigenous culture and get to know *its* strengths. Where? Perhaps one ought start with one’s own “backyard”, the indigenous culture of one’s own country. If it is Australia, then let it be the culture of the traditional Australian Aborigine. It is often mentioned how grand is the long history of, say, the Hindu culture of India, or the Confucian Chinese culture (prescinding from its recent Communist regime), their venerable ages alone being a cause for respect. Missionaries such as Father Matteo Ricci approached them with respect. Well, the Australian Aboriginal culture was immensely long and in *certain respects* highly sophisticated. By way of illustration, let us touch on this briefly.

Father Donald MacKillop, a Jesuit, was the younger brother of Saint Mary MacKillop. In 1882 the Jesuits from South Australia, with priests and brothers directly from Austria, undertook a mission among the Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory. Father Donald was 33 when he arrived in Palmerston (i.e., Darwin) in 1886, full of energy and zest. He commenced Aboriginal language studies and became acting Superior of the Mission on occasion, even in his first years. Having been made Superior in 1891, he promptly closed all other mission stations and concentrated his personnel resources on a new commencement, east side of the Daly. In 1892 he published the following letter: *"Australia, as such, does not recognise the right of the black man to live. She marches onward truly, but not perhaps the fair maiden we paint her. The black fellow sees blood on that noble forehead, callous cruelty in her heart, her heel is of iron and his helpless countrymen beneath her feet. But we are strong and the blacks are weak; we have rifles, they but spears; we love British fair play, and having got hold of this continent we have every square foot. The little Tasmania is our model, and, I fear, will be, until the great papers of*

Australia will chronicle, 'with regret', the death of the last black fellow." Donald had to pull out of the mission in 1896, and by the end of the century the Jesuit mission there had closed. The Lutheran mission of Hermansburg (130 kms south-west of Alice Springs) was much longer and more successful. Donald MacKillop's paper, "Anthropological Notes," concerning the tribes of the Daly River, was published by the Royal Society of South Australia. One of the things he commented on was the language of the Aborigines. *"It is a beautiful language – or, rather, contains the elements of a very perfect one. ... Take only the question of gender. They distinguish carefully between organic and inorganic nature. Whatever lives will live an animal of a vegetable life. If animal the gender will be Male or Female; then comes the vegetable or lowest form of life; then inorganic life. A tree living belongs to the third gender; cut it down it passes into the fourth. All adjectives capable of the inflection must agree with their nouns in gender, and the verb in the third singular has all the four forms and likewise must agree in gender with its noun."*

I am not here claiming that Father MacKillop was an *expert* in the language of his chosen Indigenous group. He would not have been there long enough to become so. I quote him only to bring out the tragedy and injustice of despising an indigenous culture. He, a Christian priest, approached his indigenous society with respect and something like a reverential fascination for aspects of its millennia-old culture. He knew that the Redeemer of man wished to invite them to come to him and to learn from him, and that they would find rest for their souls in him. He is the Saviour of the world, and all are called to be his disciples. All indigenous cultures and ways of life will find their completion in Jesus Christ. The challenge for believers in Jesus was, and is, to show to each culture, including the indigenous, *that* this is so, and *how* so. It requires great talent and character, but the love of Christ is what urges it.



Refugee and Migrant Sunday (Celebrated in August in Australia, in January internationally, in other months in various countries)

Entrance Antiphon, Collect and Scripture readings are those of the Sunday on which this day is observed.

(For the purposes of a reflection, let us take the following Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46)

Jesus said to his disciples, When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger

and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

Then they will go

away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:31-46)

Mercifully Generous In the popular moral thinking of classical times, *generosity* was praised and was, of course, regarded as important for social life. However it was also assumed that it ought be practised with *discretion*. Aristotle writes that “*the liberal man will give for the nobility of giving. And he will give rightly, for he will give to the right people, and the right amount and at the right time, and fulfil all the other conditions for right giving*” (*Nich. Ethics*, 4.1.12). So the *virtuous* man gives *correctly*. The *prodigal* man “*gives to the wrong people*” (4.1.14) – and he wastes his resources by “*giving indiscriminately*” (4.1.5). The ancients generally thought that the virtuous man does not give *indiscriminately* – he gives worthy things to worthy people. A *worthy* recipient was one who in some sense practised the virtues – it being understood that any human being had the potential to practise the virtues (and so be self-supporting and gain wealth). All this was good and sensible thought, but it had implications

for the idea of *liberality*. Now, in Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son we notice how *prodigal* the father of the wayward son was in giving to his younger son all his inheritance and then in receiving him back with liberality. It might seem as if the father was like the prodigals who in Aristotle "*sometimes make rich those who should be poor*" (N.E.4.1.35). He seemed to give indiscriminately to the wrong person. After all, the wayward son himself was prodigal in his indiscriminate spending – while the elder son showed virtuous discrimination. *All these years I have served you*, he told his father. Hearing of this parable, the ancient moralists might have approved of the elder son's reasoning that *he* should have been the object of the father's liberality, not the *unvirtuous* and wayward younger son. What we see here is that it is not virtue in the younger son which is the motive of the father's generosity towards him, but his *need*. So the course which common sense might dictate about liberality is here critiqued. Our Lord is telling us what it is to be prodigal and generous in a *virtuous* way. What is it to be *virtuously* generous? It involves more than a discriminating prudence. It involves being (what

might appear to normal worldly standards) indiscriminate and foolhardy, for it is *need* and not virtue which is the *paramount* criterion for a *worthy recipient*.

No one, hopefully, would accuse the hard-pressed refugee of being unvirtuous because he is in need, although this can be a vague assumption in the mind of the potential giver – and it is the migrant and refugee who is in our mind here. The point of the above considerations is to remind ourselves of the danger of inclining excessively towards a “prudent discrimination”, and seeing that as the criterion of *virtuous giving*. Our Lord has set before us the principal criterion for a worthy recipient. It is not that he or she be in some sense virtuous, but rather that he or she (or they) be in real need. But there is a far more decisive factor at play in responding to the one in need. It is that the incarnate Son of God identifies with him. If anything makes a person worthy of being a recipient of generous giving, it is surely this. What we do to that person we are doing to the risen Lord of glory. *He*, Jesus the Lord, is in need when the least human being is in need. This raises the stakes,

for he, the risen Jesus, is worthy of all service possible and there will be consequences. How do we know this? We know it because he has said so, and the results will come home to roost for every single person. *'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'* He will reply, *'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'* Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. It is a most remarkable thing, in the sense that man would not have expected it, that the Origin and End of all things, the most high God, the Creator and Lord of all, is so very loving of each and every one of his children. In particular he loves those of his children who are in need. His love is almighty and it is all-merciful. He takes the part of the lowly and the afflicted, and he expects of those who are endowed that they act on his behalf in coming to their need. And there is so much need, so very much suffering! In the course of his great book, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864), John Henry Newman had this to say about the great objection to there being a God at all. "The sight of the world is nothing else than the prophet's scroll,

full of ‘lamentation, and mourning, and woe’” (p. 250). It is all “a vision to dizzy and appal; and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution” (p. 251). There is so much suffering!

The foregoing considerations are *not* meant to suggest that there ought be *no* discrimination at work in being generous to the needy, nor that an eye ought not be kept on the moral attitudes of those who are in dire need. Any priest is familiar with those who come to the Rectory of his parish seeking quick financial assistance after indulging their failing for alcohol. To give that person money without discrimination simply because he is in need may compound the need. The same applies to the one who is in need because of his craving to gamble. What must be done when in the presence of such a person and all others in need is to *appreciate* that he is in need, and to appreciate his high dignity as a child of God. We ought remember the dictum of our Lord that we ought do to others what we would like done to ourselves (Matthew 7:12) – provided this is properly understood. But the most basic thing

is to have clearly before us that Jesus Christ identifies with those in need, and he expects of us that we serve them as we would serve him.



World Mission Sunday (29th or 30th Sunday of Ordinary Time)

(Mass for the Spread of the Gospel, with the Gospel of Mark 16:15-20)

He said to them, Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well. After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:15-20)

Christ's Mission Our Lord tells us that we are to pray continually and never lose heart (Luke 18:1 8). In view of what we have just heard in the Gospel passage, let us consider what ought be the first object of

continual prayer as it is set forth in the first petition of the Lord's prayer. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come! The first thing our Lord teaches us to pray for is that God's reign will be established in the hearts of men, and first of all in our own hearts. But if we are to pray such a prayer, we need to have a genuine desire for the universal reign of God. That is to day, we need to be genuinely committed to the mission of Christ and his Church. The mission Christ has entrusted to his Church is to make disciples of all the nations. As he says to his disciples in today's Gospel, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." This means, in the first instance, us. We ourselves must become ardent disciples of the Master. But then Jesus our Master wants us to bring him to all others. We are called to be ambassadors of Jesus Christ wherever we are, at home, at work, in our neighbourhood, in our parish, wherever. In the first few centuries, in the midst of many severe persecutions, the ordinary Catholic acted on his immediate social environment and influenced others to draw near to Jesus, and thus did the Church triumph. A few years back a great survey was taken of

churchgoers, and one interesting detail emerged. While Catholics constituted the largest churchgoing group, some Protestant groups (some, not all) had a much higher proportion of their faithful sharing their faith with others. Of course, there are many Catholics who are doing constant apostolic work, but many are scarcely engaged in the Church's apostolic mission at all. Our Lord called the Twelve "apostles," a word which means an ambassador, an envoy. They were to be with him as his companions, and were to share in his work. As our Gospel today makes clear, we all called to share in that vocation, in the sense that we are all called to be apostolic, representing Jesus and drawing others to him.

One may wonder, to whom ought I be apostolic? In what sphere of life can I be missionary, associating myself with our Lord in his active mission of drawing others into saving contact with him? I do it firstly and especially within my family, in my wider family circle, among my friends, in my work environment, and wherever I go or with whomsoever I normally mix. I do it wherever in his Providence God

has placed me. But of course we must have a mind for all those we would not normally have any contact with, and those who themselves do not have any contact with apostolically minded Christians. There are many such persons living within the neighbourhood in which I live. They include non-practising Catholics, non-Catholics, very many non-Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, agnostics, and many practical atheists. We ought ask ourselves if there is anything we can do systematically to reach out to them in the name of Christ. Thinking of our Gospel today, we ought ask how, especially by our friendship, can we draw them into contact with Christ who is the divine treasure of the Church. There may well be organisations and individuals in our parish who are trying to do just this, and by joining them I would be able more easily to enter into that apostolic outreach. There are apostolic movements in the Church which enable their members to do this regularly and effectively. Our Lord says elsewhere in the Gospel that "if anyone declares himself for me in the presence of men, I will declare myself for him in the presence of my Father in heaven." Just think of the reward coming to us if often, week after week, we directly

or indirectly declare ourselves for Jesus before others. The Holy Spirit is guaranteed to help in this ongoing mission, for our Lord said, do not worry about what to say in this work of witnessing to me, because when the time comes, the Holy Spirit will teach you what you must say. But then, there also is the work of bringing Jesus Christ to the world far beyond my own sphere of influence. He said to his disciples, go to the whole world and bring the Good News to all creation. I can contribute financially to the work of the Church in the foreign missions, and in that way I shall share in the merits of those who bring such souls to the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.

On World Mission Sunday let us ask ourselves, What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for him now? What am I going to do for him in the future? Our Lord asks us to be persistent in our prayers, and apostolic in our actions. Let us ask God persistently for the grace of an apostolic spirit, a spirit of mission to be exercised in our everyday life, leading us to bring souls to Christ our Lord and Redeemer.



